

The Black Scarab of Amun-Ra

Jon Aristides

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Manufactured in the United States of America.

For Matthew and Laura

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The Black Scarab of Amun-Ra

I was staying in the Ramses Hilton, situated on the banks of the Nile. It was half-past two on a sultry August afternoon, and in an hour's time I was going to take a leisurely walk across the 6 October Bridge. At the other end, I would meet a man who would hand over the priceless artifact I'd been in search of for more than ten years: the Black Scarab of Amun-Ra. My long journey was approaching its conclusion.

I had traveled the world in search of the sacred beetle of the sun god, Ra. Always, it had eluded me, sometimes miraculously so. In New York, after carefully planning the murder of its philanthropic American owner, I actually had it in my hands. However, an English detective had thwarted me and taken possession of it. I was landed in a position from which I was fortunate to escape with my life, and was subsequently forced to change my appearance by means of plastic surgery. Outwardly, I was a new man. Inwardly, my obsession with the scarab continued to fester.

Legend had it that the black scarab had not been crafted by human hand, but had come into spontaneous existence like the beetle after which it was named. A product of a blessed thought of the sun god, Ra, it represented the light of the universe, and the mysterious powers of regeneration that sustained it. I didn't believe any of this, of course. What I did believe was its price tag: currently a cool two million U.S. dollars.

I'd followed the scarab's trail from New York to London, where the English detective had taken it. I believe the foolish man had intended to donate it to the British Museum's Egyptian collection, but two days after arriving in London, he was found murdered in his Chelsea flat. His throat was been cut from ear to ear, and the scarab, of course, was gone. A rumor surfaced about it being taken to Norway, where a wealthy private enthusiast wished to make it the star acquisition of his collection. Whether it was true or not, I don't know. The first certain news I received was that the scarab had returned to Egypt, and was now in the hands of a small-time crook who sold fake antiques. I contacted the man, his name was Ahmed Bakr, and asked for an inventory of his bogus goods. Imagine my excitement on discovering that the sacred beetle of Amun Ra was among his pathetic collection! Of course he didn't realize its importance, but I recognized it by the minute description I had demanded of him. In particular, the bottom of the stone beetle had been used as a seal by the great pharaoh, Amenhotep III. Bakr immediately accepted my offer of ten thousand dollars, and

now I was in Cairo to collect my due. His shop lay on the other side of the bridge, and in a very short time, the sacred beetle would finally be mine.

At three-thirty I called a taxi and described in egregious Arabic how the driver could arrive at Ahmed Bakr's seedy shop on the other side of the bridge.

"Ah, effendi, I know that area very well. There is no antique shop in the place of which you speak." I waved him on impatiently.

"I'm not paying for your opinion. Simply follow my instructions, and drive on." When we arrived at the spot where the old antique shop should have been, however, we found nothing but a seedy hotel called the Amun-Ra. The Egyptian driver turned to me with smug satisfaction.

"You see, effendi? There is no antique shop here." I was puzzled. The instructions had been explicit. This should have been the place, although it obviously wasn't.

"Draw up here and let me out. I intend to ask inside the hotel," I said to the driver irritably.

"Should I wait for you, effendi?"

"That won't be necessary," I replied shortly, and tipped the man generously. The Egyptian's eyes lit up.

"The blessings of Allah be upon you for your generosity, effendi. I will wait for you here, as this area of Cairo is not safe for foreigners. As you say in English...one good turn deserves another." I smiled, and clambered out of the narrow little black and white car. Perhaps it was just as well that he waited for me.

“I shouldn’t be more than five minutes.”

“Do not worry, effendi. No matter how long you may be, you will find the driver Yousef waiting for you here.” I entered the Amun-Ra Hotel and was immediately struck by its almost unearthly silence. A swarthy Egyptian in a tarbush lounged at the reception desk smoking a cigarette. He looked me slowly up and down in a disapproving manner.

“Do you need a room?” he asked, evidently surprised.

“No, no...that won’t be necessary,” I said briskly. “I was told that an antique dealer by the name of Ahmed Bakr had his shop here. However, I find only your hotel...” The swarthy Egyptian smiled.

“Indeed it is true, effendi, that the rogue Ahmed Bakr has been known to occasionally conduct his somewhat perfidious schemes from this establishment. We have tolerated him only because my wife is his sister. He left without explanation some days ago, and we have heard nothing from him since. If you had arranged some meeting with him to view an “ancient Egyptian artifact,” I advise you to put him right out of your head. The man is a villain, and a charlatan. Anything he told you was surely false.” I pondered the man’s words for a moment. On the surface, it appeared I’d been taken for a ride. I recalled the minute description I had received from Ahmed Bakr of the black scarab. No, there was no doubt: the description had definitely been of the genuine article.

“Mr....” I began.

“Hesham,” the man politely volunteered, with a little bow of the head. “Hesham Rashwan.”

“Mr. Hesham, I would be greatly indebted to you if I could have a word with your wife. I feel that she may be able to solve a little mystery for me concerning the activities of her brother.” Hesham Rashwan looked doubtful.

“I don’t know, sir. That rascal gives us both nothing but heartache, but Aisha, that’s my wife, still loves Ahmed as her little brother. She feels she must protect him since their mother has passed away. It is enough that he has gone. I would prefer not to upset her with any further remembrances of his villainy.” I took out my wallet and withdrew a hundred-dollar bill.

“I quite understand, Mr. Hesham. Neither of us wishes to cause your wife unnecessary distress. This hundred dollars is yours if you will just let me speak to her for ten minutes. I assure you, my questions will not distress her in any way.” The seedily dressed Arab looked at the hundred-dollar bill for a moment, and then he smiled.

“You are fortunate, effendi. My wife returned from a visit to her parents just moments before you entered. I am sure Aisha will be honored to speak with a well-to-do American like yourself, even if the subject matter causes her a little pain. What is your name, effendi?”

“Horus. Sebastian Horus.” The Egyptian gave an ironic flourish of his right hand.

“Of course, I should have guessed,” he said with a smile. “You are the son of Isis and

Osiris...the boldest of magicians.” Now it was my turn to smile.

“Actually, my name is Slavic in origin. When my great- grandfather first entered America from Poland, Horus was the nearest pronunciation that the immigration officials could get to Horowitz.”

“Horowitz is a Jewish name...”

“Yes. My family is of Jewish origin. Now, Mr. Hesham, my time is rather short.” The Egyptian gave an exaggerated bow and pointed to the stairs.

“Of course, Mr. Horus. My wife’s room is on the first floor.”

Rashwan led me up the rickety flight of stairs and turned left at the first landing. We passed five or six grubby doors before stopping in front of a pair of white double doors. He gave a sharp rap and shouted some words in Arabic. After a few moments the door opened, and a beautiful Arabic countenance stared at me in surprise.

“You want to speak with me, sir?” I looked at her husband, who nodded at me encouragingly.

“Yes, Madam. If you can spare a little of your time. My business concerns your brother...” A fleeting shadow passed over her face.

“Anything at all, Mr...” The woman looked in her husband’s direction for aid.

“The gentleman’s name is Horus, Aisha. Mr. Sebastian Horus.”

“Please step inside and take a seat, Mr. Sebastian,” she said politely. I found myself in a large, exquisitely furnished chamber. For a moment, I was taken aback. The room was a stark contrast to

everything else I'd seen in that place. The door clicked shut behind me. It was evidently not Hesham Rashwan's intention to stay with us during our talk. I settled into a luxurious white armchair with gold braiding. The sun streamed through open French windows, catching the figure of the Egyptian's wife in a halo of light. I considered her more closely. My first impression had certainly been accurate. She was a mixture of Arabic and European, the type of beauty more commonly seen in Lebanon or Syria than in Egypt. Her jet-black hair hung over her left breast. This struck me as strange, because her name was clearly Muslim, and Muslims in the Middle East and Africa invariably covered their heads before a stranger. She wore an expensive black silk dress, which showed off her figure perfectly. Her features were dark and exactly proportioned, but her eyes were her most striking feature: huge, dark, and intense.

"How can I be of service to you, Mr. Sebastian?" she asked with a flash of perfectly white teeth.

"I am looking for your brother, Ahmed Bakr, Mrs. Hesham. Do you know where he is?" The woman's irritation at the name of her brother was evident. The black orbs dimmed with anger.

"My brother left us some days ago. He had intimated that it was his intention to return to our family home in Beirut. I have heard nothing from him since. I will probably receive a letter or phone call within the next few weeks." I took my card

from my pocket and held it out to my beautiful hostess.

“As soon as you hear something from him, I’d appreciate your informing me. I am staying at the Ramses Hilton for the next couple of weeks. Your brother had procured an antique object for me, which I would be loath to lose. I am sure you understand....” The subtle flash of fear that passed briefly over her face showed that she had.

“If my brother told you he had acquired some artifact for which you have been searching, Mr. Sebastian, I advise you to put it completely out of your head. Ahmed exaggerates both his abilities, and his importance, especially to wealthy foreigners. Doubtless he knows nothing of the object for which you search, but wished to get you here in order to sell you the items he does have.”

“Your brother gave an accurate and minute description, Mrs. Hesham,” I replied bluntly. “I feel sure that the object was in his possession.” Anger, irritation, and the same look of fear from moments before passed briefly over the woman’s face. Her words however, were non-committal.

“If my brother should contact me within the next couple of weeks, I will call you. For now, I am afraid that there is nothing more I can do to help you.” I rose and extended my hand.

“You are right, Mrs. Hesham. Thank you, however, for the help you have already given me.” She gave a little forward inclination of her head.

“I am afraid it is not very much, Mr. Sebastian. Good day to you.” The beautiful wife of Hesham Rashwan led me to the same door by

which I'd entered. Outside, her husband was leaning against the farther wall, smoking a cigarette.

"Already finished your business, Mr. Horus?" he enquired. I confirmed Hesham Rashwan's surmise and allowed myself to be led down the old stairway. At the reception desk, I shook the Arab's hand and thanked him for his civility before leaving the hotel. I crossed the road to where my taxi should have been waiting. It was gone.

I arrived at the lobby of the Ramses Hilton feeling drained. My trip had been a disaster, and I seemed as far as ever from discovering the whereabouts of the Black Scarab of Amun Ra. But I was certain that the beetle had been, and probably still was, in the hands of Ahmed Bakr. His description had included even the most obscure detail. A message at the reception desk made my heart race with renewed hope.

"A man called Ahmed Bakr is waiting for you in the bar, sir. He says that he has some important business to transact with you."

"I see," I replied, with a coolness that was far from how I was truly feeling. "In which bar is he waiting for me?"

"In the Tutankhamun, sir." I thanked the receptionist and headed off quickly. My heart sank. Although I searched the place high and low, I could only find a couple of Americans having a conversation about computers. Ahmed Bakr had left. I decided to return to my room on the ninth floor.

As I opened the door, I immediately knew what had happened. The figure sitting bolt upright

in the chair near to the window was clearly dead. A bullet hole in his forehead still trickled blood. I knew that the victim had to be Ahmed Bakr. I quickly went through his pockets and found his wallet. Sure enough, a photograph identified him as Ahmed Bakr of Cairo. I resumed my search and was almost finished when I noticed a bulge in his back pocket. I was barely able to drag the heavy object out without ripping the pocket off. I stared in disbelief. I was holding the Black Scarab of Amun Ra in my hands! I checked it over for markings to confirm my initial deduction. In my jubilation, I didn't consider the man's death, or how he had come to be in my room. I had the scarab, and that was all that mattered. Everything else was secondary. But even in my excitement I realized that I had to dispose of the body and remove any association between the man and myself. How could I do it? Only one course of action suggested itself. I would tip it out of the window. No one would know from which window he'd fallen, or how. With luck, nobody would care, either, and his death would be dismissed as unworthy of further investigation. Of course, there was always the bullet through his head to suggest foul play, but suicide was still a possibility, even if it had taken a third party to tip him out of the window. The police were unlikely to get hot under the collar about some small time crook-cum-antiques dealer who'd probably been shot in some grubby dispute with other small-time criminals. Life was cheap in Cairo.

I dragged the big window open and pulled the chair holding Abdul Bakr's slumped body over to it. Then I heaved the Egyptian's body onto my right shoulder. In front of the open window, I paused for a moment, gathering strength. With great effort, I pushed the body upwards and the corpse of Abdul Bakr hurtled into space. I closed the window quietly. There was naturally a fuss, and I was one of the major suspects. The receptionist knew that the man had come to the hotel to see me. Circumstantial evidence was also strong. Geometrically speaking, Ahmed Bakr had hit the ground in such a way and at such an angle that made a headlong dive from my window perfectly feasible. To my benefit, it was equally possible that he had fallen from one of twenty other windows, and there was no absolute evidence that he had been thrown or pushed at all. Perhaps he had shot himself standing in front of the window and then fallen to the ground? Under the circumstances the evidence was weak, and although I was suspected and questioned, no charges were brought. After all, Ahmed Bakr had been a peripatetic nobody, while I was a valued foreign guest of the Ramses Hilton.

Two days after Ahmed Bakr's death, I had a surprise visitor. It was Aisha Rashwan. I was just finishing breakfast when I got the call. I told reception to send her up, and I wondered what she could want. Her husband had told me that she was close to her brother, but somehow I didn't feel she would have shed too many tears over Ahmed Bakr's death. A few moments later, there was a

sharp rap at the door. I opened it to find a bellboy standing with Aisha Rashwan by his side.

"Thank you, that will be all," I said to the bellboy, dismissing him with a glance. "Please come in, Mrs. Rashwan. I was very sorry to hear about your brother. I extend my most sincere condolences," I said gravely. Aisha Rashwan passed into my room, dabbing ostentatiously at her eyes.

"It was such a shock to my husband and I, Mr. Sebastian. I thought he had returned to our parents' house...when really, he was about to be murdered right here in Cairo."

"We don't know that for sure, Mrs. Rashwan. I was told that there are several possibilities as to why your brother lost his life," I replied cautiously. The sniffing became a full-blown shower of tears.

"Ahmed would not have committed suicide, Mr. Sebastian. Of that I am sure." I placed my hand on her shoulder and directed her to a white armchair near the window—the same window from which I had flung her brother just a few days earlier. The Lebanese woman made a conscious effort to collect herself, as if it was of the utmost importance that some essential information be communicated.

"Mr. Sebastian, it has come to my attention that Ahmed had actually found the article for which you were seeking. This article—a scarab...a black beetle—is much sought after by certain ruthless people, and I believe that it was my brother's possession of it that led directly to his death." I shook my head and tried to give a lit-

tle smile that would convey both sympathy and doubt. It was important that I should give nothing away until I knew something about this woman's angle. After a little pause that I might well term "pregnant," she continued. "Although further investigation may show that my brother was the victim of some faction fighting for its possession, I feel sure that the deeper, and more fundamental, reason for his death was the ancient curse of the great Pharaoh Amenhotep that invariably leads to the death of any person who bears the black scarab."

I considered Aisha Rashwan thoughtfully for a moment. This was certainly a big change from our last conversation, when she'd professed to be completely ignorant of the scarab's existence. Her shimmering, black eyes looked searchingly into my own.

"Mr. Sebastian, let me be frank with you. I believe that you are in possession of the Black Scarab of Amun Ra. I beg you to give it to me before you suffer the same terrible fate as my brother. I will take it to an archaeologist named Jeremiah Smith. This man has devoted his life to returning the scarab to its rightful place in the tomb of King Amenhotep, in the Valley of the Kings. Only then will the curse be finally laid to rest."

She'd related her story well enough. But no amount of fine acting was going to convince me to give her the scarab, nor make me believe that she was telling the truth. I smiled. But this time I didn't try to make it pleasant or sympathetic.

“You’re going to have to do a lot better than that, Aisha Rashwan. If I have the stone, and I don’t admit that I do, do you really believe that I would give you an artifact worth at least two million dollars on the strength of the cock-and-bull story that you’ve just told me?” Her coal-black eyes dwelt on me reflectively for a moment and slowly, their softness disappeared and a new gaze, hard as ebony, rested upon me.

“Mr. Horus,” Aisha Rashwan began, “I will be completely honest with you. Do you know why the black scarab is worth two million dollars to certain people?”

“No, I don’t,” I said matter-of-factly (In fact, I’d often wondered why this particular scarab should be so valuable when similar rocks were only worth a few thousand dollars each). A sardonic smile played around the corners of Aisha Rashwan’s darkly beautiful mouth.

“Then allow me to enlighten you, Mr. Horus. The scarab is a key—a key that will open the tomb of Amenhotep III, where enormous treasures lie; treasures worth hundreds of millions of dollars. At present, we do not even know the location of the tomb, other than the obvious fact that it is situated somewhere in the Valley of the Kings in Upper Egypt. Ancient hieroglyphic texts make clear that the stone will lead its bearer to the entrance of the undiscovered tomb, although it doesn’t say how. The ancient legend states that the architect of Amenhotep’s last resting place, a certain Men-ho-ra, deliberately retained the scarab in order to raid the treasures of the tomb at a later date. However,

days after Amenhotep's death, Men-ho-ra was found mysteriously strangled in his own house, and the black scarab was missing. Since that time, the stone has circled the globe several times, always dealing out death and destruction to those who sought it only for personal gain. It is said that the curse will only be lifted when someone of pure heart returns the stone to its rightful place in the tomb."

This was quite a story, but I wasn't sure how Aisha Rashwan saw her role in this business. Was she a fanatical do-gooder, intent on returning the scarab to Amenhotep's tomb, or was her interest essentially mercenary?

"And what is your personal interest in all this, Mrs. Rashwan? Do you want to return the scarab to Amenhotep's tomb? Do you believe in this so-called curse? Why are you giving me this information? Assuming you're telling the truth, the scarab is priceless, and you hardly know me." Aisha Rashwan gave a smile like a panther's snarl.

"Actually, I hope to become very rich, Mr. Horus," she replied. "And I need a partner with the same motives. A partner like you. You have the scarab; I know how to use it. Shall we agree to cut the proceeds fifty-fifty?" I shook my head decidedly.

"Nothing doing, Mrs. Rashwan. I work alone. And, besides, I don't have the black scarab."

"Is that your last word on the matter, Mr. Horus?" she said coldly. I nodded, and the beautiful Lebanese woman rose to her feet with a frigid look in her ebony eyes.

“Very well. It’s your choice. I advise you to watch out for the curse though, you are certainly not immune.”

“Is that a threat?” I asked politely. Aisha Rashwan smiled mirthlessly, a smile that wasn’t one at all, but rather a jagged split in a beautiful face.

“Not at all, Mr. Sebastian. It is a warning.” She turned and walked to the door, where she paused for a moment, and looked over her shoulder.

“If you should change your mind...” I responded to her offer with a question.

“Mrs. Rashwan, do you know who killed your brother, or how he came into possession of the scarab?” The Lebanese woman’s rosebud of a mouth turned up in a little smile.

“Oh yes. It was Hesham, my husband, who is actually not my husband. We can accurately describe him as, shall we say, a “fellow treasure hunter.” At first I paid him to help me find the scarab, but when he discovered that my brother (who was actually just another paid accomplice) had acquired the scarab, he took it into his head to double-cross me and take the beetle for himself. Ahmed Bakr had come to see us the very day you visited the hotel, and was hiding in the attic during your stay. After you left, we argued, and Ahmed Bakr was lucky to escape with his life. He came to see you here, but was followed by Hesham. In the Tutankhamun bar, Hesham approached Ahmed and pretended to make a deal with him. Together, they would wait for you, sell the scarab and split

the proceeds. A friend of Hesham's works here, and it was he that let them both into your room. Once they were alone, Hesham shot Ahmed through the head, and was about to search him when you returned. He hid under the bed, from where he saw you search Bakr and find the scarab. He also saw you pitch the unfortunate fellow out of the window. He took the opportunity to make his escape when you later left the room. Does that adequately explain everything?" she asked coldly. What she said made sense, and I guessed she was telling me the truth, letting me know the kind of people I'd got myself involved with. She was also implying that if I didn't keep my nose out, I'd wind up just as dead as Ahmed Bakr.

"That's a nice story, Aisha; I won't call you Mrs. Hesham after what you've just told me. Why don't you tell it to the police?" She sneered.

"Because if I did, they would search you and find the scarab. I want that for myself," she replied.

"Well, sorry to disappoint you, but you won't be getting it. I can assure you of that." Her lip curled up again.

"Don't be too sure about that, Mr. Horus. You've already seen that locked doors provide no protection. You should beware of Amenhotep's curse...I have a premonition that your life is threatened," she said, and left abruptly.

I used the rest of the day to decide on a course of action. I could sell the scarab, as was my original intention. However, I'd then be supplying somebody with the key to a treasure far greater

than the two million I'd receive in return. On the other hand, it was possible that the Arab woman had been lying or exaggerating for her own purposes. I'm a realist. Myth and magic play little part in my business. I decided that the best thing I could do was to fly to Upper Egypt and make a visit to the Valley of the Kings. I would check out this character she'd spoken of... Jeremiah Smith. If he existed, he could show me how to go about finding Amenhotep's hidden tomb, although he certainly wouldn't be sharing in the rewards. If he didn't exist and Aisha's words proved to be only hot air, I'd make the sale in a few days' time. By the time I'd worked all this out it was getting late, and I barely had time to book myself onto a southbound plane for the next day. I took a few hard drinks in the hotel bar and was ready for bed by eleven o'clock. I had a long day tomorrow.

I was sleeping like a baby when something impinged itself on my consciousness and drew me from my slumber. It was a kind of glowing light accompanied by a soft moaning, and for a moment I couldn't recall where I was. As my senses slowly returned, I focused on the disturbance that had awoken me, and sat bolt upright. An eerie figure, glowing brightly with its own inner light, stood near the door. My blood ran icy at the sight. In the aura stood a hideous, moaning mummy, swathed from head to foot in bandages. It was murmuring indistinctly. I caught "Amenhotep," "scarab," and "worthless traitor," before I reached for the Beretta pistol I always slept with, took careful aim at the bandaged chest, and fired. The monster

screamed and dropped to the floor like a felled ox. I felt my confidence and belief in the tangible world returning. For a visitor from beyond, the mummy seemed reassuringly vulnerable. I jumped out of bed and flicked on the lights. The still, bandaged-wrapped body lay sprawled on the floor. Blood from a chest wound poured onto the expensive carpet, and it was obvious that my visitant was quite dead. I tugged at the bandages wound loosely about the head. They came away easily enough and revealed the face of Aisha's accomplice, Hesham. The friend who had previously given him access to my room had obviously performed the service once again. Moments later, all hell broke loose as hotel staff began hammering on the door, and demanding entrance in response to the noise from my pistol. I stepped confidently over to the door and flung it open.

"Please come in, gentleman," I said calmly. Of course, I was completely exonerated. If a man has a duplicate key of your room in the Hilton Hotel and enters it dressed as a mummy at three in the morning, it's reasonable to say that he deserves all he gets. It was concluded that the Egyptian had entered my room with an intention to rob, and the mummy disguise was intended to frighten me in the event that I should awake, as I had indeed done.

I didn't manage to get to Upper Egypt as I'd planned that day, so after telling the police all I knew about Hesham Rashwan, or some of it anyway, I re-booked my flight for a couple of days later. The flight to Luxor was uneventful and I

booked into the Marriott. After my experience at the Hilton in Cairo, I felt that it was time for a change. I immediately began searching for any trace of Jeremiah Smith, the man mentioned by Aisha. I was lucky, and almost immediately came across someone that knew him. My informant was drinking in one of the hotel's well-provisioned bars. He was an archaeologist of about fifty, who'd been visiting the Valley of the Kings, on and off, for nearly a quarter of a century. He claimed to have some connection with Professor Weeks's team and the excavation of KV5, though whether this was true, I don't know. He was already drunk when we met, and more than happy to spill his guts when I bought him a drink.

"Jeremiah Smith? I should say I do know him, old man," he said importantly. "He's famous around here. A crank, you know? He's been looking for some non-existent tomb, and a non-existent key to open it, for the last twenty years. You can see him wandering around the Valley of the Kings almost any day of the week, quite aimlessly of course. I believe he lives in a kind of mud-brick structure he made for himself, not far from the entrance to the valley, over on the west side of the Nile. I can show you if you like." I took out a hundred-dollar bill and passed it to my newfound friend.

"That would be good. Is tomorrow suitable? Say about eight o' clock." My new guide pocketed the hundred-dollar bill greedily and nodded his head.

“No problem, old man. I’ll see you at the reception desk.” I took his name—Algernon Smithers—and room number, and decided to catch up on some sleep.

I guess that I’d been sleeping for about five hours, when the faintest of noises woke me. I was a light sleeper at the best of times, and at stressful times a gust of wind could rouse me. There was a woman dressed as a maid, searching through the coats in my wardrobe. She was so absorbed in her job that she hadn’t bargained on the rustling of clothes disturbing me. She was a singularly beautiful maid of dark complexion. I took my Beretta from under the pillow and sat up.

“So nice to see you again, Aisha. Can I be of service?” I asked politely. The Lebanese woman turned from her occupation and stared at me with eyes full of hate.

“You will never find the treasure, Mr. Horus... not without my help.”

“I see,” I replied thoughtfully. “And just how can you help me?”

“I know Jeremiah Smith, Mr. Horus.”

“Well, I think I can meet him without a letter of introduction from you,” I replied sarcastically. “In fact, I can reasonably say that everything has already been arranged.”

“You know where he is?” the woman asked, clearly dismayed.

“Oh yes...and I’m sure I can make it worth his while to help me.”

“Jeremiah Smith’s life has been dedicated to returning the Black Scarab to its rightful resting

place: the tomb of Amenhotep. He will never help someone like you," she said angrily.

"Oh, he'll help me," I said confidently. "Willingly, or unwillingly. Tell me, Aisha, would you like to become my partner?"

"Your partner?" asked the Lebanese woman incredulously.

"Yes. I think you're right. There are ways in which a beautiful woman like you could help me...relax, shall we say?"

"You want me to be your whore, Horus?" she said.

"A witty conceit, Aisha—I hope you don't object to me calling you that?"

"Not at all, Mr. Sebastian. In fact, I was about to suggest it myself, so we think alike." I spent the remainder of the night with her. It occurred to me that she didn't seem to be missing her accomplice and lover, Hesham, very much.

At eight o' clock the following day we entered the reception area in search of Algernon Smithers. He was exactly where I expected to see him, lounging on the desk, smoking a cigarette.

"We'd better hurry up, old man. Gets damned hot in the Valley of the Kings later in the day." Although I felt sure he'd been drinking all night, Smithers didn't seem any the worse for wear. We arrived at a small village called Abu Areesh just after midday, and here Smithers told us he could go no further, as the heat was bothering him too much. Personally, I think that he was in urgent need of some liquid lubrication and knew of some people in Abu Areesh who might be prepared to

service him. I took directions from Smithers concerning the exact location of Jeremiah Smith's house, which was in an isolated spot on the main road leading to the entrance of the Valley of the Kings. He left after a generous payment and Aisha and I hired a car. Smithers had apparently called Smith to let him know that an amateur enthusiast who might be prepared to help finance his activities was coming to see him that day. Smith had promised to be back from his activities in the Valley of the Kings by midday.

We drove in silence for some time along the great twisting road that led to the entrance of the Valley of the Kings. I finally stopped the car in a deserted spot and turned to the beautiful Lebanese woman sitting at my side.

"This is as far as you go, Aisha." The flashing black eyes gave me a shocked glance.

"What do you mean?" she said incredulously.

"I mean, I don't trust you. And anyway, I have no intention of sharing my treasure with anyone else. I'm going to tie you up and leave you in one of these caves. Don't worry, I'll let you have some food and water. In a day or two, I'll tip someone off about where you are." Tears sprung to her eyes.

"But Sebastian...I love you. How can you do this to me?"

"You don't love me, Aisha," I said with a laugh. "You love the scarab that can lead you to the treasure. But you're not getting any of it."

"You son-of-a-bitch!" she yelled, and I clasped her hands firmly together. I left her well

trussed-up and continued on my way. I was only ten minutes away from Smith's house now. I felt the hard object in the inside pocket of my jacket. The scarab was still safe.

Smith's house was a nondescript affair, as might be expected from the nature of his operations there. He was standing outside watching the road, and was obviously expecting me. He began to wave when he saw my car and I drew up next to him. I jumped out and extended my hand to a balding man of about sixty-five.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Dr. Smith," I said politely. "I am Sebastian Horus. This is a privilege I've been looking forward to for a long time. I have followed your search for the tomb of Amenhotep like a fascinated schoolboy." I obviously sounded convincing, because he squeezed my hand trustingly.

"Thank you, my boy. It's very kind of you to say so," he said appreciatively. "Are you traveling alone?"

"No, Mr. Smith. I'm touring Egypt with my fiancée, but I'm afraid she was unable to come today. The extreme heat of the desert is troublesome to her."

"I quite understand, Mr. Horus. I don't really like it myself," he replied. "Let's go inside my functional abode here and get something to eat and drink. Please feel free to ask me any questions you like." Once inside Smith's house, I started to spin my tale. By chance, I had bought an antique that I had since discovered to be the Black Scarab of Amun-Ra (at this point, I showed him the stone). I

knew little about it, but esoteric information had come to me which indicated that it might have some bearing on the search for the tomb of the pharaoh, Amenhotep III. By this time, Dr. Smith was fidgeting with excitement.

“My boy, you don’t realize it, but you have the key to our search. With this scarab, we can find the tomb, and destroy the curse of Amun-Ra for all time.” I tried to look astonished.

“That is difficult for me to believe Dr. Smith...”

“But it is true, nevertheless,” he said, hopping from his chair excitedly “Now, we must head for an area of the Valley of the Kings in the extreme northeast immediately. This is where I believe Amenhotep’s tomb to lie. After that, the scarab will show us the way.”

Within five minutes we were driving at top speed toward the Valley in Dr. Smith’s four-wheel drive. We were given no problems at the entrance, as Smith was a well-known archaeologist who entered the Valley daily. Nor did it take us long to reach the area where he believed Amenhotep’s tomb to lie. He stopped the vehicle in a secluded desert area, and eagerly stretched out his hand to me.

“Now give me the scarab, my boy, and I am sure that we will discover the location of the lost tomb within minutes,” he said excitedly. I passed it over without a word. Let the old fool do the dirty work for me. No one but Sebastian Horus (a pretty pseudonym) would be claiming the fabulous treasure.

In the old man's caressing hands, the scarab seemed to take on a new life. To my utter amazement, it began to glow with a green light. When Smith went in the wrong direction the light would fade and diminish, but if he was on the right track, it intensified. It took the man only a few minutes to reach a point where we were both bathed in emerald green light.

"This is it," he said in awe. "The tomb of Amenhotep III." I looked around, but there was only sand in every direction.

"I don't see anything," I said, trying not to sound irritated. Smith pointed at the sand under our feet.

"It is here, Sebastian. The stone will show us everything. Watch." He raised it in both hands above his head and began to chant some words in a language quite unknown to me. I presumed it to be ancient Egyptian. Suddenly, the green light formed a green vortex around us, and we literally began drilling into the ground. I can't explain what happened, but within moments, we were standing in front of a submerged doorway that was choked with sand and obviously hadn't been opened in millennia.

"That's solved one problem, Dr. Smith," I said, trying to sound casual. "But what do we do now?"

"Don't worry," he replied confidently. "The scarab will do the work for us." Smith rubbed it lightly against the ancient door and this time, it glowed a golden yellow. Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, the door began to open inwards.

Within a few moments it lay completely open, though we could perceive only blackness and the musty smell of ages as we peered inside.

"This is the moment we have waited for, my boy. Let us pass inside. The scarab will show us the way." We slowly entered an antechamber filled with small ornaments, and walls covered in drawings and hieroglyphics. It was illuminated by blue light.

"Not much here, Dr. Smith," I said, barely concealing my annoyance.

"This is only the antechamber," he replied. "The burial chamber must lie beyond that far door." We walked slowly to the next, highly decorated door, and here Smith repeated his previous action of passing the scarab over the surface of the ancient entrance. A red light suffused us as the great door slid slowly open. We passed through the open door of the antechamber into the stagnant air of the burial chamber itself. It was piled with gifts and jars. In the center lay a huge stone sarcophagus. Dr. Smith pointed to the jars.

"Those are the canopic jars holding the internal organs of Amenhotep." I must admit that I wasn't too inspired by this information. There were some pretty artifacts in this room, but I couldn't see anything that seemed worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

"Is this the last of the rooms, Dr. Smith?" I asked casually.

"Oh, by no means. There is another door on the left, in shadow at present, which leads to the final room. That will be the treasury." The old fool

lowered his voice as if disclosing a secret. "It's said to hold untold riches, you know."

"The treasury?" I responded innocently. "And you'll open the door in the same way? By passing the scarab over the surface?"

"Yes, of course. Why do you ask?" I took out my pistol and pointed it at Smith's heart.

"Because with that knowledge, your own presence becomes superfluous, Dr. Jeremiah Smith." Smith looked at the Beretta with an almost comic incredulity, which slowly turned to anger.

"You fool," he shouted. "You don't know what you're doing...the scarab..." But I heard no more, as I squeezed the trigger at that point and shot Smith three times in the chest. He dropped to the floor of the tomb, already dead. I took the scarab from his hand before passing to the door that he had indicated on the left.

I paused for a moment before its strange hieroglyphic writings. They seemed somehow ominous. With an effort, I dismissed such fancies, and passed the scarab over the door. To my amazement, nothing happened. I tried again, and once more there was nothing. I stood still for a moment, thinking, when a strange noise began to impinge itself on my consciousness. It was the sound of scraping. I turned around quickly and flashed my torch in the direction of the noise. It was coming from the great sarcophagus of Amenhotep. A little light filtered through from the open doors. But even with my torch trained on the sarcophagus, I couldn't see very much. I moved a little closer,

and the scraping noise became more distinct. To my utter horror, I perceived that the lid of the sarcophagus was slowly sliding back! I turned and ran to the door leading to the antechamber, but it slammed shut in front of my nose, just as the whole burial chamber became bathed in a deep purple light. Horrified, I watched the lid of the sarcophagus crash to the floor, and a head and shoulders rise up from the interior. I screamed. The head and shoulders were wrapped in grey, decaying bandages and the head slowly turned to look at me. A voice boomed out in a strange and ancient tongue, yet somehow, surely by the power of magic, I understood.

“Greedy fool that you are...you have made your own fate. Only a pure man can enter the tomb and set me free for eternity while preserving his own soul. But you will pay a heavy price for my survival: the complete obliteration of your own soul...” I screamed again. The creature had heaved itself out of its death-box by this time and was slowly approaching me, streaming bandages behind it.

“Get away. Get away you child of Satan—or I’ll shoot!” I yelled in anguish. A terrible laughter filled that rancid pit of death, and the monster continued its approach. I fired three times, and then again, before I realized that my situation was completely without hope. I couldn’t hurt the creature. I waited for my end, and tried to say a prayer but couldn’t think of the words. The last thing I remember was the mummy’s hands closing around my throat.

Aisha had been lucky. After forty-eight hours, she'd succeeded in slicing the rope that tied her hands with a jagged piece of rock that lay nearby. It didn't take her long to get a lift back to Abu Areesh, where she quickly hired locals and the services of Smithers once again to make a team that could follow Horus's footsteps. They discovered Dr. Smith's empty house and the missing vehicle, and drove on to the Valley of the Kings. Fortunately, Smithers was acquainted with that section of the eastern part of the valley so little time was lost in conjecture about where the two men had gone.

Once Aisha, Smithers, and the Egyptians arrived in that desolate and silent sector, a great mound of sand immediately attracted their attention. They ran to the edge of it and peered over. Below, deep in the ground, lay the open entrance to Amenhotep's tomb. The party scrambled eagerly down the sloping walls of sand, and flashing their torches before them, entered the ancient resting place of the pharaoh.

Once inside the antechamber, they observed a second open door, and they quickly passed through. In the burial chamber, still bathed in an unearthly light, they observed something that sent Smithers screaming back through the entrance. The Egyptians sank to their knees and invoked the protection of Allah. Strangely, Aisha only laughed.

Sitting on a golden throne behind the open sarcophagus sat a beautiful bronze-skinned man with all the paraphernalia of power and state clothing his regal body. On his head, an Egyptian crown bore testimony to his Kingship. A black scarab rested in the center. His eyes were closed in peace, and the arms were folded across his chest in the Egyptian style of death. In the foreground, sprawled awkwardly on the floor in front of Aisha and the kneeling Egyptians, was a human carcass seemingly thousands of years old—and yet the putrid flesh still smelt of corruption. Gumless teeth lay bare in an open jaw that seemed to be screaming in silent agony, even now. The man, if the creature that lay beneath their eyes could be called that, was dressed in the modern garbs of an explorer. They belonged to Sebastian Horus. A Beretta pistol still lay in the bony grasp of his skeleton fingers.

Caroline

I'd been waiting for a flight to Dubai, but I'd overslept and missed it. Somehow it didn't fill me with the dismay that it should have. Now I could take it easy in London for a few days, while I decided what to do next.

The first thing I did was to leave my small hotel in Baker Street, and book into the Marriott. After all, why was I always conserving my money? I should spend it, and enjoy myself for a while. Who could tell? Maybe I'd never be called on to pay for the dreaded old age. After a sumptuous meal, I made my way to the park. "Which park?" you may ask. To tell the truth, I'm not even sure. It was a kind of amalgamation of all the famous London parks, and I don't remember anything about it except the basic fact that in it, I met Caroline. But that's not really accurate...better to say that in it, I met her for the last time.

I was just entering a part of the garden filled with trees and wild flowers when, in the distance, I caught sight of a slight figure running toward me. I knew it was Caroline immediately. Exactly how I knew, I really can't say: she was still too

distant to make out facial details. I just knew that the long fair hair blowing loosely in the wind had to be hers. She approached, still a little breathless, and laid her hand on my shoulder.

“So, you finally made it,” she said with a smile. “I thought that you were never going to get here.”

“What goes around, comes around,” I replied vaguely. “Anyway, what are you doing here?”

“Oh John, you’ve arrived on a very important day,” she said earnestly. “You can meet the man I’ve decided to marry. In fact, you must stay with us for the weekend. I insist.”

“What do I care about the man you’re going to marry? I have other things to do,” I said abruptly.

“Oh John. You must help me. Tell me what you think of him. Do you think he’s the right man for me?” she asked. I gave her a sour smile.

“So you still have some doubts?” Caroline looked at me earnestly.

“Oh yes, John. Lots.” I considered. It was nice to see Caroline again...and maybe she really did need my help. After all, who knew her better than I? Furthermore, it would be a pleasure to talk about the old days again...

“Okay, Caroline, I’ll stay. Where are you living now?” I asked.

“It’s just the other side of the park. Mum and Dad sold up the house in Dover a couple of years ago. Mum’s fine, but Dad’s been suffering of late. The main problem is that he’s getting old. The

everyday ailments are catching up with him; the diabetes, the angina, the rheumatic back.”

“How bad is it?” I asked with concern. She shrugged.

“Pretty bad. Anyway, he and Mom have gone off to Paris to relax for the weekend, and left the house free for us.”

“You seem to have it all worked out nicely, Caroline. So, where’s your knight in shining armor, and what does he call himself?”

“Just call him Perry—like Perry Mason. His real name’s Peregrine, but he doesn’t like it.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“Don’t be sarcastic, John,” she said sternly. “Perry is an extraordinary person, and I’m sure you’re going to love him. Let’s walk back to the house. He’s inside, watching the horse-racing.”

“Is he a gambler?”

“Not really. He just likes to watch it.”

“That’s what they all say.”

“All, who?”

“All gambling addicts.” Caroline laughed, and took her arm in mine. It began to feel like the good old days again.

“You’re so cynical, John.” I grunted.

“There’s nothing cynical about warning you of the dangers that lie ahead for a girl who marries a compulsive gambler.” Caroline giggled.

“I don’t think that you’re going to be an impartial judge.”

“Trust me, Caroline. If he’s the man for you, I’ll let you know.” We’d been walking for twenty minutes, and finally reached a large blue gate. A

big, modern house stood alone on the other side. I guessed that it must have had at least seven bedrooms.

"Anyone else living here except you and your folks, Caroline?"

"Well, these days, Perry spends most of his time here as well. We're trying to get used to the idea of being married." For the first time, I felt angry.

"I didn't mean Perry. I meant other members of your family."

"Oh, yes. Well, my brother Ernie is here, on and off, between trips abroad. You remember Ernie, don't you, John?" I nodded my head. I remembered Ernie very well. We'd been to university together, and it was through him that I'd first met Caroline.

"How is he these days?" I asked casually.

"Well, he's not getting any younger either...but as long as he can drink, he seems happy enough."

"Still has the drinking problem then?"

"Oh yes," responded Caroline in a tone that suggested that this was an immutable fact.

"And what about you, Caroline? How is it you've changed so little?" She responded with a quick little laugh.

"Maybe you're seeing me through the eyes of the past, John." I nodded my head thoughtfully.

"Could be. How old do I look to you?" Caroline looked at me carefully.

"Oh, I'd say you look about twenty-five." I laughed outright.

“That’s very funny, Caroline. I’m more than double that...but then, so are you.” Caroline looked puzzled for a moment.

“Well, yes...I suppose I am. Anyway, let’s go inside and meet Perry.” We crossed the threshold of the luxurious house and immediately heard racing commentary emanating from one of several downstairs rooms.

“That must be Perry,” I commented dryly.

“Yes,” confirmed Caroline from between tight lips. “Perhaps he *is* rather too obsessed with gambling. He must have been in front of the television for more than three hours today.”

“That’s a bad sign, Caroline. Don’t marry him.” Caroline laughed outright.

“Don’t be silly, John. You always liked gambling too.” I gave a grunt of indignation.

“It may be true that I sometimes gambled. However, unlike Perry, I knew how to control myself.”

“That’s what they all say, John. Come and meet him.” We found Perry just polishing off a bottle of whiskey. He was slumped on the sofa, with an expression of acute misery on his face. The empty scotch bottle stood within easy reach.

“Oh, Perry,” exclaimed Caroline, “you’re not drunk again? And just when I wanted you to meet an old friend of mine.”

“Not drunk at all,” mumbled Perry in a thick alcoholic’s voice. “Just a little blue, as my last three horses have all gone down.” He turned on the sofa and stole a glance at me. “Hello, old fel-

low. I guess that you must be the one taking my place.”

“Taking your place?” I repeated in bewilderment.

“Yep...new blood to take care of Caroline, you know. Guess I’m getting a bit past it. I’ll have to move on soon.” Caroline began a wailing tirade against her fiancée and finally turned to me.

“John, how can I possibly marry a man who’s a gambler and an alcoholic?”

“Well, I must admit that you do know how to pick them, Caroline. You’d be a fool to marry this specimen.” From the sofa, an almost obscene groan issued from Perry. It seemed that the situation was getting entirely beyond him. At last, Caroline strode to where Perry lay, and without ceremony, bundled him into a heap on the floor.

“Go and collect your things, Perry. You’re leaving this house right now. I’ve had enough of you. And anyway,” she said, looking at me tenderly, “John’s returned.” Perry slowly collected his limbs, and with a curious blink in my direction, he left the room. Caroline turned to look at me. I knew exactly what she was going to say. After all, I’d rehearsed this moment many times before.

“John, I’m sorry about what happened. Let’s start again. It’s never too late.”

“How long have you been waiting, Caroline?” I asked quietly.

“Since the day they told me that I’d die of thrombosis if they didn’t amputate my leg. You were there, John.”

“Yes,” I nodded sadly. “I was there, and I watched you slowly slip away because of your refusal to allow them to operate.”

“But you agreed with me, didn’t you, John? You could never have loved only half a woman.” Tears began to flow from my eyes.

“I would have loved you the same, Caroline, but you didn’t give me the chance. I pleaded with you to let them operate.”

“Yes, you did,” confirmed in a tight little voice, “but you would have been beastly to me afterwards.”

“No, Caroline. Never,” I said in a whisper.

“I’ve waited for you here, for all these years, John. I am young and whole...and waiting for *you*.” I shook my head, almost blinded by the tears.

“It’s too late, Caroline. We can’t go back and relive the lost years: years we lost due to your selfishness! Time moves on, and people change. You’re the same as when you died twenty-five years ago. I, on the other hand, have changed. I am wiser, less proud. Less willing to spend an eternity with you, making no advancement.”

“No...advancement?” I knew I’d hurt her, but only the truth would be enough this day.

“Yes, Caroline. I’ve moved on in my quest. Loving you is no longer a major motivating force. I want to improve over my next few lives, and achieve wisdom as soon as I possibly can. You cannot help me in that quest. Your desires are the same as they were at the time of your death. If you’d only been a little stronger, we might have

grown together. Instead you're stuck here, between lives, waiting for me...for a man who cannot yet help himself. I must pass on, Caroline. Thank-you for waiting for me, but I intend to ascend immediately, and I want you to ascend with me. You've already been here too long. It's time for you to change as well." Caroline was looking at her feet and she answered in a small voice.

"It's really not so bad, John. I don't mind staying here...I can keep the memory of what we were, alive." I took her white, frightened hand in mine and squeezed it tenderly.

"The time has come, dear, and I'm very glad that I found you here. All thanks, to the God that knows everything in Heaven and Earth. Come with me now." And we left hand in hand, without another word.

Death of a President

He could hear the agitation in the indistinct mutterings and barked commands around him. Only his wife's voice was distinct in its hysterical agony:

“They have shot the President!”

It was an odd paradox. He'd received the fateful bullet in a place of entertainment, just as the war he had presided over for four years was drawing to a certain close. He had no doubts about his death, and he knew that the half heard sounds around him were no more than a trick of dying. Perhaps his life was the final necessary sacrifice.

As his world began closing down, paradoxes of his presidential years presented themselves for examination. Perhaps the greatest of all was that he, the gentlest of men, had been cast in the role of commander in chief of the Union forces. As such, he'd obdurately refused to consider any compromise or peace that would have threatened the integrity of the United States of America. Indeed, he'd insisted on absolute and speedy victory, and the sluggishness of General McLellan and others in leading the Union forces had led to their con-

troversial dismissals. In Ulysses S. Grant, however, he'd found a man whose sense of urgency in conducting the war had been as great as his own. What did it matter if the two men had little else in common, and if the cries of 'butcher' were partly justified? The important thing had been to protect the Union: that, and nothing else.

He'd come to understand the black man slowly. He had gone to war for the preservation of the Union, not for the emancipation of slaves. In time though, he'd come to appreciate the role that the black slaves had played in fighting for the Union. This had made him dwell thoughtfully on the words of the American constitution concerning all men being equal before God, and he was converted to the cause of emancipation. In the four years he had thought still remained to him, he'd intended to raise the African slave to full American citizenship. Perhaps it had been too soon.

The President's dispersing thoughts returned to his poor Illinois childhood, and his bucolic beginnings: to the brave and able man who had been his father, and the loving mother he'd lost when he was only ten. He remembered, oddly perhaps in the circumstances, the reverence he had held as a boy for all living creatures, and the numerous occasions on which his friends had laughed at him for helping a rabbit, or for returning a young bird to its nest. What an irony that it was he who'd presided over the United States in its moment of greatest agony and hatred.

Death came as a relief to us all: to the soldier, who knew no more would ever be asked of him

again; to the dying child, whose sufferings were at an end; to the old man, whose life had become a burden to himself, and to those around him; and even to the President, who had completed his work, and was destined to be remembered for one thing alone. It was both a blessing, and a punishment. A blessing, to be remembered forever in one's moment of glory, and not live to fade into obscurity and inconsequence; and a punishment, to be deprived of one's final years, surrounded by friends and family, and stories about the old glory days of yore. The President knew that he deserved both the blessing and the punishment: it was simply another paradox amongst many, another necessary sacrifice.

America was still the land of the free. The republican experiment had survived, and the U.S.A. would face the future confidently, as a united entity, rather than as a disparate group of conflicting states constantly at war. But the price to be paid for such deliverance was inevitably high. God, Fate, Destiny, call it what you would, did not hand out free gifts to men: everything had to be paid for on both individual and collective levels. God truly moved in mysterious ways, and while man was his agent in the mathematics of change, it would be presumptuous to suppose that he could ever determine his exact place in the overall divine equation.

Too many good men had died, the President was sure of that. The nation had to face the future deprived of its greatest souls. At the very time when magnanimity and justice were of paramount

importance, he feared that the arrogance of victory and the petty hatreds of small-minded men might overshadow the unique opportunity of the present peace to achieve something wonderful. He wondered how the recently emancipated slaves would fare under these new conditions. Yet, it was all part of the Creator's plan of retribution and renewal. Whatever evil was to befall the nation would be merited and, equally, the small uncertain steps made individually and collectively toward a finer state would be deserved. All was written in the Great Book of Fate, and each man had his part to play in its unfolding.

The President sensed that he was being moved down stairs, even as his consciousness trembled on the very edge of infinity. It was all a waste of time: he was dying, and he knew that the moment was right for his passing. Momentarily, he regretted that he must leave at a time when so much work still remained to be done, but that would be for others to complete. After all, one man could only achieve so much, and no one was indispensable. Dimly, the President realized that he had been laid on a bed, and was pleased that his spirit could depart from this more conventional setting. Even in his present state of ghostly awareness, he registered the hysterical grief of his wife. He knew that she would suffer greatly from his death, and a useless pang of regret stirred somewhere deep within him. It was divine will, and he was unable to help her. He knew that she was frivolous and irresponsible in many ways; that even her honesty had sometimes been question-

able during the last four years in the White House. She was nevertheless the mother of his children, and he loved her, and had been faithful.

Everything was slipping away now: the grave responsibilities of state, and even the sense of his own person. It seemed he was passing from one state of being to another. In his very last moment, before his sense of identity itself expired, a final request, more an assertion, affirmed itself in the very essence of what he had been, and was to become: "God bless America."

Fatmoogas: Ruler of the World

Fatmoogas was just an ordinary American teenager, interested in sports, girls, and the Internet. There was, however, one way in which he differed from his peers. Fatmoogas was determined to become Ruler of the World.

Of course Fatmoogas wasn't his real name. His real name was Jake, but no one ever called him that. Even his Mom called him Fatmoogas. The name was apparently one of many Internet aliases used by Jake, but it had stuck.

By the time Fatmoogas was fifteen, his plan for world domination was complete. He decided to put it into action during a long summer vacation. First, he would hack into the mainframe computer system of the United States and take control of the Alpha computer (this controlled every government computer in America). After that, he'd need to quickly perform certain tasks before the boffins figured out what had happened.

He set to work, and was in control of the Alpha computer in less than three hours. Fatmoogas's plan for world domination had begun. Next, he transferred all the financial resources of

the American government into a variety of bank accounts around the world, accessible only to him. After that, he used the Internet to purchase an army of mercenaries, and several American operational bases. Nuclear codes were acquired, together with the necessary passwords that would gain him access to the armed services' bases and hardware. Fatmoogas then passed these on to his army of mercenaries, who simply walked into the military bases around the United States, and took control. The president, his government, the senate, and congress, were butchered in a single surprise attack. With the entry of a secret code (that was a secret no longer), he took control of all branches of the media. It was only late afternoon of the first day and Fatmoogas already controlled America. He'd achieved total domination without once having to move from his computer.

He decided that it was time to speak directly to the shell-shocked victims of his coup d'etat via the television airwaves. Fatmoogas made it known that all citizens should sit in front of their TV screens at nine o'clock that evening in order to hear his directives. He prepared his speech carefully and sat in readiness before his computer at the appointed time, waiting to go live.

"Five...four...three...two...one...zero."

"Good evening, citizens of America. I am Fatmoogas, your new master. I want to take this opportunity to reassure you that not a lot will change in your lives. It's just that you will be paying your taxes to me, instead of the government. Also,

should anyone complain, he will be hung, drawn, and quartered: the old ways are still the best!

“You may ask why I have decided to become your new master. It is because I believe that democracy was destroying our great country, and that someone had to take a stand in order to deal with the myriad of external threats with which we are faced. What’s the point in having a nuclear arsenal unless you are going to use it? With this in mind, it is my hardened resolve to nuke Russia tomorrow. I know that they are officially not communists anymore, but I still don’t trust them. After that, I think I’ll totally obliterate the Middle East, and let the whole peninsula sink into the sea. The Israelis are ungrateful wretches, and the rest of the people there hate us anyway. None of them will be missed. Towards the end of the day, I am also going to nuke Britain. This is because they still don’t realize that America has taken their position as leader of the world. I hope that this harsh, but necessary, lesson will have the effect of shutting them up once and for all. I may well decide to nuke several other nations, or even continents, in the coming days and months. However, you can all be sure that I will only be acting in the best interests of the United States and its citizens.

“People of America; the democratic experiment has failed. Like the ancient Romans of old, we must develop an autocracy to survive. I, Fatmoogas, am your Julius Caesar, and if I am ever to die, only my descendants will have any justifiable claim to be your master. However, I am working at present on a process by which my brain may be

saved for all eternity, in the form of electric pulses inside a computer chip. If this can be achieved, I will remain with you for evermore..." Suddenly, a voice startled Fatmoogas. His mother was standing behind him, watching his antics at the computer.

"Are you still playing that silly war game on a beautiful day like this, Fatmoogas? Why don't you go out front? It looks like some of the other boys are playing a soccer match." Fatmoogas looked at his mother sadly and shook his head.

"I'm afraid I can't, Mom. I need to put together a five- year plan for the American economy within the next two hours."

"And will you do that alone?" said Fatmoogas's mother with a smile. Fatmoogas nodded his head somberly.

"I'll have to, Mom. You see, there's no one else I can trust. America is relying on me." Fatmoogas's mother shook her head.

"I really don't know whether to laugh or cry when I see you playing war games all day, Fatmoogas. I'm sure it can't help your spiritual development," she said seriously. Fatmoogas gave her a pitying look.

"Mom, you've got it all wrong. I belong to a new generation, one that's determined to make a difference."

"Well, well... Let's hope you will," replied Fatmoogas's mother, surveying the dust on top of her son's computer disapprovingly. "Let's hope that you will."

Foros

The ride from Simferopol to Foros had been mostly silent. Svetlana had only shaken her tousled, tomboyish hair when I'd asked about Dasha. It seemed that she was sick in bed with a temperature and Svyeta had had to come alone. With Edik, that is.

I liked Edik. He was easy to deal with, and spoke much more than Svetlana or I during the long journey, despite his being the driver.

"It's nice to see you again, Yuri," he said pleasantly. "How stupid it is that Ukraine and Russia are now two separate countries. They kept you at the customs desk for nearly an hour? Almost as if you were a *foreigner*!" I nodded politely.

"Yes, things have certainly changed a lot in the last ten years," I said, glancing at Svyeta's perfect profile. Was I mistaken, or did it register a slight sneer?

"More for us, than you, Yuri," he responded. "Russia remains strong with Putin as leader. He won't take nonsense from anyone. We have the assassin, Kuchma, for our permanent boss, and

I'm afraid there's no getting rid of him. A journalist was recently getting too close to uncovering government corruption with his insistent investigations. The monster had him killed." I turned my attention back to Edik.

"Yes, I heard about that. It was too bad. But you overestimate Putin. He's a decent man, and a strong leader, but what can a single man achieve in a time of such economic chaos?"

"Perhaps, but it's still worse here than in Russia," he repeated gloomily. Even Svyeta felt the need to back him up on this point.

"It's so unfair, Yuri," she declared. "We are Russians, who happen to live in Ukraine, and they treat us as second-class citizens. Ukrainian is even preferred to Russian in the schools and government offices."

"Everybody knows that the Crimea is really Russian," I replied. "If not for that fool, Khrushchev, it would still be an official part of Russia today."

"Yes, but it isn't, Yuri. And we have to survive somehow." Svyeta's words had the vague edge of a threat about them and I turned in my seat to look at her. But she was drearily looking out of the car window again, as if nothing had been said for an hour. Edik continued where she'd left off.

"Svyeta's right. My job in the power plant is as good as finished, although they've told me nothing officially. Now I divide my time between a dozen activities that barely enable me to feed my family. Some of the jobs I do make me feel ashamed, but there's no longer a need in my coun-

try for engineers. It seems we are returning to a pre-industrial society. And in the meantime,” he concluded bleakly, “a man must still put food on his family’s table.”

I didn’t like anything about this journey. I didn’t like Svyeta’s moody silence and I didn’t like Edik’s numerous complaints about life in the Crimea. I had the feeling that I was being prepared for some blow. That I was being given the reasons why I should accept a situation that, as yet, I knew nothing about. Most of all, I disliked the fact that I knew that they were right about the suffering of Russians in Ukraine. Was this a prelude for Svyeta to beg me once again to take her and Dasha back to Moscow with me? If so, this would prove to be a difficult visit. Nothing had changed. My wife and three children would still be awaiting my return three days from now.

Hardly another word was spoken before we stopped at a well-known naval restaurant in Sevastopol. Then Svyeta became a little more animated, but still spoke only of the difficulties that she and Dasha had to endure in the Crimea.

“This time Dasha is sick, Yuri. Really sick. The doctor says she’s run down, but personally, I put it down to a poor quality diet. I do my best, but sometimes it’s as much as I can do to put food on the table. You just don’t realize how bad things are here.” The now familiar complaint made me uneasy and I tried to change the direction that the conversation seemed bent on taking.

“Svyeta, you should look on the bright side. Foros is a far more beautiful place than Moscow.

Especially in the summer,” I added encouragingly. This time, her sneer was distinct.

“No place is pleasant without money, Yuri. And you are well aware that winter here can be dreadful. I struggle every day to keep Dasha warm when it arrives.” Edik, who’d been listening attentively to our discussion thus far, rejoined the conversation.

“Svyeta is right, Yuri. Decent people can no longer be sure that their families will be adequately fed. Dasha is a beautiful girl, and Svyeta cares for her as well as she is able, but perhaps a different environment would be beneficial for her. Forgive me for being so direct with you, my friend, but in your absence I’ve come to see Dasha almost as an addition to my own family.” His words made me feel more uneasy than ever. It seemed that he was obliquely referring to his own added burden over the past years when, as I well knew, he’d treated Svyeta and Dasha almost as part of his own, already large, family. It was beginning to look as if he expected me to finally take full responsibility and relocate Svyeta and Dasha to Moscow. Didn’t he realize how completely impossible that idea was?

“Edik has been so kind to Dasha and me over the last ten years,” said Svyeta in an emotionless voice. “I really don’t know what we would have done without him.” I felt a growing apprehension as we recommenced our drive to Foros in silence. It was increasingly clear that something big was on the horizon, and I could still only think that one

more desperate attempt was to be made at forcing me to transfer Svyeta and Dasha to Moscow.

Arriving in Foros, Edik left us at the music school where Svyeta and Dasha were living for the season. Their cramped apartment was let out every summer to vacationing Russians. Svyeta was still turning the key in the lock when she dropped the bombshell.

"I've taken an American fiancé, Yuri. I intend to marry and return with him to America."

"What are you saying?" I shouted, almost raising my hand.

"We're sick of this life, and I fear for Dasha's future. You do what you can for us, Yuri, but the truth is that Dasha and I have taken second place in your life. Your family in Moscow is far more important to you than we are. We're a burden to you both financially and emotionally, and I'm sure you'll be relieved to see us go," she said, calmly opening the door. I followed her into the room and sank down into a chair adjacent to the old piano-forte.

"Why are you doing this?" I groaned.

"It's for the best, Yuri. Dasha will be well taken care of, and your financial worries will be over."

"Do you love him?" I asked.

"That is not the point," she replied harshly. "He is a decent man and he'll look after us. And free you of an onerous and unwelcome burden," she added.

“Svyeta...how can you say that?” I enquired feebly. But a faraway look had come into her eyes. She pointed at one of several doors.

“Go and see your daughter, Yuri. Dasha’s through there.” Still protesting, I walked into the small room. Dasha lay on a rickety bed in the stifling heat. She was sleeping uneasily, with the bedclothes tossed onto the floor. Sweat had soaked the sheets and beads of perspiration stood out unhealthily on her forehead.

“She is sick,” I cried to Svyeta. “Why is there no air conditioning?”

“We can’t afford it, Yuri,” she replied, calmly entering the room. “What little money we have is spent on food.” I moved to the bed and knelt down by Dasha’s side.

“Dasha...can you hear me, little one?”

“Not so little anymore,” said Svyeta in a strained voice. “We celebrated her fourteenth birthday a week ago.” I’d forgotten. My own daughter’s birthday, and I’d forgotten.

“Svyeta! Why didn’t you remind me? You know that I’ve been very busy lately.” She laughed harshly.

“What difference would it have made, Yuri?” she said. “But soon you’ll be free of us for good.”

“What are you talking about?” I shouted angrily. “You know very well that only great pressure at work could ever make me forget Dasha’s birthday.” The sound of my raised voice stirred Dasha from her slumbers and she blinked her green eyes. After a moment of confusion, she looked directly at me.

“Papa...is it you?”

“Yes, my little precious,” I replied, close to tears. How could I have forgotten her birthday while she lay here sick and malnourished?

“It’s good to see you again, Papa. How long have you been here?”

“Just a few moments, Dasha. Don’t exert yourself, my dear. I’ll be around for some time. Sleep now, we’ll talk later.” Her cupid-bow lips smiled as she drifted off again.

I decided to excuse myself on the pretext of visiting a friend, and took a long walk by the sea. This time of year, Foros was bursting at the seams with Russian tourists staying in the various sanatoria. In the days of the Soviet Union, these sanatoria had been virtually free for use by industrial workers. Now, rooms were let out to rich Russians at exorbitant rates of up to one hundred dollars a day.

My thoughts were in turmoil. There was nothing I could do. I already had a wife and family in Moscow. How could I abandon them? They also needed me: perhaps even more than Svyeta and Dasha did. Svyeta was still beautiful enough to have interested a rich American. My wife in Moscow, however, would be totally lost without me. She would perhaps even die, and what about the children? They needed me more than Dasha did. She was a survivor like her mother, resourceful and talented. She played the piano like an angel, and the accordion with the gusto of a street busker. The world was made for people like her: the beautiful and talented were the inheritors of the earth.

I nodded to myself. It was for the best that this American had interested himself in the two of them. Dasha would attend school in America and learn English. She'd become an American citizen and unimaginable opportunities would be open to her. Svyeta, too, would be happy. A colorful and free populace would know how to adequately reward her for her beauty and musical skills. She taught music now, but perhaps in America she'd be allowed to perform once more. Svyeta had been on the verge of a solo career as a concert pianist at the time of the Soviet Union's collapse.

Yes, I thought. Everything had worked out for the best. Now, it was better if I didn't make the situation more difficult than was necessary. Protracted leave-taking would only make things harder. I'd return to the music school immediately and say a final farewell to Svyeta and Dasha. After that, I'd return to Moscow, finally at ease about the future.

Everything was silent as I entered the old school. The sound of low voices came to me from the room where Dasha lay and I pushed open the door. Inside, Svyeta was sitting on the floor with her knees pulled up to her chin. Dasha was sitting up in bed and it seemed that the mother and daughter had been talking heart to heart. As I entered, Svyeta looked round at me. There was no mistaking the sneer on her beautiful lips. In contrast, Dasha's big green eyes rested on me, full of pleasure, and she smiled.

"Welcome back, Yuri," said Svyeta, ironically. "Did you have a good time with Alexei?"

“I never saw him,” I replied shortly. “The two of you should start packing. You’re coming back to Moscow, with me.”

Inca City

I was led to Inca City the day my mother died. I'd adored her, and after her passing I could sense that her presence was near. She'd died in the early hours of a new day, and now, fourteen hours later, I lay on my bed drearily waiting for nightfall. Succumbing to a deep slumber, I dreamed of her love, how she'd always supported me through thick and thin. My mind reached out, receptive to any contact from the other world, hopeful that she remained close by. My sensibility was obviously noticed by other spirits in the crowded nether regions: spirits looking for help from someone alive and receptive.

The nature of my dream suddenly changed, and it seemed that I was whirling around in a multi-colored vortex. A power that would not, could not, be denied, was sucking me downwards at an incredible speed. I tumbled along, not knowing what would happen next. Suddenly, I was still. I blinked my eyes and looked around. Imagine my amazement at discovering that I lay on a flat expanse of red sand, under a crimson sky. In the east, a distant red orb was slowly rising. After a

few moments, I was bathed in the pink shimmer of the strangest daylight I had ever seen. To the north, I was able to distinguish the outlines of a city, whose pyramids and towers rose majestically into the pink ether.

I decided that the best course of action was to head toward it. I hoped to find food and temporary shelter there prior to beginning my journey home, which I somehow knew was some distance away. I guessed that the city structures lay about fifteen kilometers distant, and an apposite Chinese quotation sprung to mind, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step." Gingerly, I took my first step in the direction of the strange northern structures. From a distance, I could tell that the city was occupied. People were moving around, and their outlines began to take shape as I approached.

The pyramids were huge man-made structures with flat tops and great stone steps cut into their sides. They, and the layout of the city itself, reminded me of what I'd seen of ancient Aztec and Inca civilizations in magazines and on television. As I passed one of them, I could see several men gathered on the top of it. They surrounded a figure, tied and gagged on a slab of rock. Suddenly, the steel of a raised sword flashed, and a terrible scream pierced the air. Had I just witnessed a live sacrifice?

I was within half a kilometer of the city when a party of about ten men walked out to meet me. They were brown-skinned and the top parts of their bodies were naked. They wore short cloth

skirts, and belts around their loins, from which swords and daggers dangled. They looked much as I imagined the ancient Incas or Aztecs to have looked. The foremost of the men, dressed in magnificent robes and feathers, extended his hand and spoke to me clearly.

“My dear friend, we have been expecting you. Welcome to Mars.”

“Mars?” I queried, hardly able to believe my ears.

“Yes, Mars. We have been waiting for one like you for far too long.”

“Then I’m on another planet!” I exclaimed incredulously. “But how did I get here? I only remember falling asleep. I’m not an astronaut, just an ordinary man, who has recently suffered a terrible loss.”

“My friend,” replied the chieftain gently, for such he seemed to be, “that is why you are here. It was your sensitivity which enabled us to reach you across space and time. We are a people that once existed in the “past,” as you would say, but today, live only in the nether regions between life and death. Your astronauts will search the Red Planet and find only the merest trace of us. In the present age, the great city that you see before you lies ruined on the dusty and lifeless plains of Mars. We died as Martians, but our ancestors were humans from Earth.”

My head was whirling as I tried to comprehend what was being said. This great, golden-skinned chieftain standing before me in all his grandeur had just affirmed that he had been both

Martian and Earthling in the past, yet now, was neither. The Chieftain continued with his amazing story.

“Long ago, our civilization flourished on Earth. Through our ancient religious practices, we learnt how to travel through space and time by means of the mind alone. Several thousand of us projected ourselves into limitless space, and finally came to rest here, on the planet Mars. We remained here, living in peace, for more than ten thousand years. Then a terrible disaster struck. A giant asteroid impacted the surface of the planet, and stripped bare the life-giving atmosphere. Everyone perished. As a people, we were eventually forgotten on both our home planet, Earth, as well as on our adopted home of Mars. Using the same mind techniques by which we arrived here, we have finally been able to make contact with the present. Through you, my friend.”

“But what can I possibly do?” I enquired in bewilderment.

“Tell our story on Earth. There is not a creature in the universe that can enjoy being entirely forgotten. It was the great sensitivity and understanding that you felt today that enabled us to bring you here. You have a noble soul, and will never forget your loved ones: you *know* that their souls survive. Tell our story, so that we too may survive in the hearts and souls of your race.”

“Where on the earth did you once live?” I asked, already half-guessing the answer.

“Our home was the place that you call Central and South America. Our people were those known

as the Aztecs and Incas. Some thousands of years after our departure, the gifts of the mind by which we traveled here were entirely lost to our people on Earth. We effectively became Martians. Now, after our demise, we seek to become recognized as Earthlings again." I looked at the pink atmosphere that no longer existed, and then into the brown eyes of the proud man before me, who also no longer existed, and nodded my head slowly.

"I will tell your story, but be warned, it is unlikely that they will believe me." The Chieftain smiled, placing his right hand on my left shoulder.

"It does not matter, my friend. Our descendants feel our loss, even now, in the collective gene pool. Your story is destined to lead them to the road of enlightenment. All things are already written in the great book of fate." I nodded gravely.

"It seems I have a responsibility. I will try my best." The chieftain smiled again.

"Thank you, my friend. Now, return to your earthly life. Be assured that your mother will never be far from your side." I was suddenly swirling through the colored vortex once again, and after an indeterminate period of time I found myself lying on my bed.

I told everyone the amazing story of the Martians without hesitation. Understandably, no one believed what was perceived to be an outrageous tale, prompted perhaps by my intense grief. I know better, secure in the knowledge that by fulfilling my promise, I have planted a seed.

Is There Anybody in There?

Number Thirty-Six had always fascinated me. It loomed ominously upon the top of the hill. Locals said that it was haunted by the ghost of Elenor Ganymede, who'd lived there for five years. At the time of her death in 1935, Elenor had been as old as the century, and well on the road to obscurity. She'd been a silent movie star until the advent of talkies. These had cruelly laid bare her high-pitched, child-like voice, and as her forte was playing tragic heroines, the obvious incongruity had proved to be her downfall.

In 1930, when suitable parts had all but dried up, she'd left Hollywood and moved to the small English village of Bedhampton, where she claimed her grandmother had once lived. She'd initially entertained on a grand scale. The little village had played host to glittering parties, with guest lists that read like a Hollywood 'Who's Who.' By 1933, however, her fall from favor had become apparent to the cognoscenti, and the parties had ceased. The reclusive star had gradually become a willing prisoner in her own home. Finally, creditors banging at the heavy oaken door of

Number Thirty-Six had become a common sight. On May 4, 1935, Elenor Ganymede hung herself from the stair-post inside her large home. Her sole maid discovered her body and it had been shipped back to California for a dignified burial, attended only by a few close friends. She barely made headlines. The world had lost all interest in Elenor Ganymede.

After Elenor's death, the house was sold to settle outstanding debts. A lawyer, John Turdlington, finally bought it. He was an admirer of Miss Ganymede and her films, and paid a higher price by some thousands of pounds than had been offered by anyone else for the solitary house on the hill. Three months after occupation, Turdlington was found dead in his bed, with an expression of the most hideous terror on his face. The doctors proclaimed that he died of a heart attack. Rumors that the house was haunted began soon after.

The next owner of Number Thirty-Six was an elderly spinster. She didn't believe in ghosts, and was happy to acquire the house at a rock-bottom price. She lived there happily enough for two years. In fact, she even altered her opinion about ghosts, informing the locals that the house was indeed haunted by the specter of Elenor Ganymede, but that the spirit was in search of company, and had welcomed her as a friend. After two years, the old spinster was found hanging from the same stair-post that the film star had hung from. A verdict of suicide was recorded, and the house remained empty since that time. Now, it was little more than a rotting husk on the hill.

My personal interest in the house was generated by two factors: first, I was a self-styled psychic investigator with time on my hands and, second, I really loved the old silent films featuring Elenor Ganymede. A further reason for my interest was that I'd written several books on psychic phenomenon, and was reasonably well respected in the field. If I could bring some light to the mystery of Elenor Ganymede, I would establish myself as the foremost psychic researcher in the field. I also happened to live little more than half-an-hour from Bedhampton by car. With these considerations in mind, I'd decided to spend an evening in the old house.

Although the deaths of the previous owners suggested that my planned project might be dangerous, on the night of my planned sojourn, I found myself feeling strangely calm. This was explained to some extent by the fact that my psychic powers gave me profound advantages over the average person. Past experience had taught me that it was the ghosts who had cause to be frightened, not me. And yet I didn't feel the usual rush of adrenalin as I approached the house at about eight o'clock that evening. It was Saturday, May 4, 1995, exactly sixty years since the tortured spirit of Elenor Ganymede had departed from this imperfect world. I'd been to the house earlier that day and surreptitiously broken the lock of the rotting door with a chisel of tungsten steel. Then I'd arranged things to look exactly as before. Nobody ever came near the place anymore, but I'd thought it best to be on the safe side. The door opened eas-

ily to my touch and I stepped quietly inside, flashing my torch around the corrupted interior. Everything smelt of earth, and I noted that my usually infallible psychic abilities remained obstinately dormant. Suddenly an object, a book I thought, flew through the arch of light created by my torch and crashed down on the other side of the room. It was a poltergeist! How was it that my psychic power had told me nothing? What kind of spectral being could nullify my potent gift? I remained still for perhaps five minutes, but no further sounds reached my straining ears. Then I ventured forward once again, stealing slowly into the center of the room.

Evidence of opulent decay surrounded me. At Elenor's whim, the room had been decorated in Turkish style and the subsequent owners had never seen fit to change it. The great geometrically patterned curtains were thoroughly moth-eaten, and close to collapse. Similarly, the Turkish divan showed its interior at numerous points. I flashed my torch upwards and caught the stairs and upper landing in a beam of light. There was the stair-post from which Elenor and the old spinster had hanged themselves. Upstairs would be the room where the lawyer had died, probably of fright.

I'd decided to spend the night in the same room, so slowly, and stepping very carefully, I moved toward the stairs. My psychic powers remained obstinately dormant as I began to climb. There was no suggestion of any tortured spirit planning evil for living entrants to the house. On the landing where the two women had hanged

themselves I did, however, pick up an emanation suggestive of extreme sadness. Rather inadequate I thought, considering the drastic events that had taken place there.

Inside the lawyer's room, I drew a complete blank. I was quite sure that there was no tortured spirit hanging around here. I was beginning to feel tired, and the big old bed looked rather enticing. Maybe I'd get nothing from this little sojourn except the elusive good night's sleep that I'd been looking for all week, I thought wryly. I explored the rest of the house, but nothing of any great interest presented itself to my tired eyes. I decided to retire to the lawyer's bed around nine-thirty for an early night. By the time I'd settled comfortably into my sleeping bag, it must have been about a quarter to ten. I immediately sank into a deep and profound sleep.

My sleep wasn't dreamless. I had a vision of a trusting old woman being struck down by a vicious blow in the back. A furious struggle ensued between her and another woman before she finally lay bound and passive on the floor. At that point, a sound, like the shuffling of rats' feet over broken glass, impinged upon my consciousness. At first I thought that the noise pertained to the scene I was witnessing, but as the sound became more distinctive, the picture of the two women vanished and I awoke suddenly.

I was still in my sleeping bag in the old house, and I guessed that it was about three in the morning. I lay absolutely still as I realized that I hadn't been dreaming. There was actually a slow shuffle

of feet approaching my bed. In fact, it was already close to where I lay. I gave a strangled scream and plunged desperately out of my sleeping bag, just in time to avoid being struck by some heavy instrument. It thudded onto the bed, exactly where my head had been moments before. Desperately, I searched at the foot of the bed for my torch. Luck was with me, and my hand grasped it at the first attempt. I turned quickly and directed its beam to the place where I felt sure that this evil creature stood. What I saw transfixed me.

Next to the bed, stood an ancient woman. Bent double, she was resting the stick she'd so forcefully used with the intention of killing me, on the empty sleeping bag. Her face was covered in the deepest and most comprehensive network of wrinkles I'd ever seen. Despite that, there was no doubt that the lunatic standing before me was Elenor Ganymede. Her tortured eyes revealed the truth in an instant. Elenor Ganymede, "Hollywood Siren," had never actually died. Somehow, it wasn't her that had been buried so many years ago. Somehow, it wasn't her that had been found swinging from the first floor landing. She'd remained in this infernal place all these years, single-handedly creating the myth of spirits in the house, and bringing a brutal end to the lives of its subsequent owners. The public's rejection had turned Elenor Ganymede into a psychotic killer.

Her green eyes sparkled at me with a lunatic light as she raised the heavy stick once more. The insane creature took a deliberate step toward me,

and an almost youthful vigor and strength demonstrated themselves in the movement.

"I am going to kill you, young man," came a cracked, old voice. "And after that," she continued gleefully, "I will cook you, and eat you for my supper. What a treat after so many years of cats and mice!" It was clear that in spite of her years, she possessed the frantic strength of the truly insane. She was an old woman, and one of my earliest idols, but I couldn't afford to take any chances. From an inner pocket, I drew out my Smith and Wesson handgun.

"Stay where you are, Miss Ganymede," I said loudly. "I don't want to hurt you. On the contrary, I wish to help you. Let me make a call to the authorities, and I'll have you out of here and into comfortable surroundings shortly." She seemed to not even hear me. With a terrible snarl, she pounced, and the stick swung up above her head. I panicked and the instinct for self-preservation prevailed. I took aim and shot her in the chest.

Piece by piece, the mystery was unraveled. The body of 'Elenor Ganymede' was exhumed. It turned out that the person they'd buried had been her maid. It became evident that Elenor had killed her in a fit of insanity and somehow succeeded in making it look like suicide. The maid had been dressed in Elenor's clothes, and since none of those who'd examined the body had known Elenor by sight, they'd simply presumed it to be her. After that, Elenor had remained in the house, growing more insane and bitter with each passing day. The lawyer with the bad heart had been literally

frightened to death by the figure of Elenor approaching his bed in the night. The poor old spinster had indeed made friends with Elenor, only to later be rewarded with an unexpected attack. Elenor had pushed her to certain death from the first floor landing and then arranged her murder to look like suicide (which is why my psychic powers had been able to pick up little besides the sadness of this old lady). Elenor had never been truly dead. Until now.

The bullet in her chest had killed her instantly. I wasn't charged with any crime, as it was evident that I'd acted in self-defense. Personally, I sometimes feel that I was too forceful, and that I should have found some other, less fatal way of stopping her. I need to keep reminding myself that she was insanely strong. The 'Elenor Ganymede Story' certainly had the effect of kick-starting my stalled career: but some say that the perturbed spirit of Elenor Ganymede now truly haunts the corridors of the decaying house on the hill.

Legba at the Crossroads

If you want to learn how to make songs yourself, you take your guitar, and you go to where the road crosses that way, where a crossroads is. Be sure to get there just a little 'fore twelve that night, so you know you'll be there. You have your guitar and be playing a piece there by yourself. A big black man will walk up there and take your guitar, and he'll tune it. And then he'll play a piece, and hand it back to you. That's the way I learned to play anything I want.

Now that's what Tommy Johnson said, but fact is, the greatest blues guitar player of all time got his licks from Legba: the voodoo god of the crossroads. Understan' what I'm sayin'? Robert Johnson never actually went down to the crossroads. He went to see a voodoo medicine man, who taught him how to put all o' that fierce energy into his guitar playin' just like a hoodoo man controls a spirit usin' his body.

Let me explain. Robert Johnson married young, but his wife died givin' birth. After that, Johnson was lookin' to find some meaning in life for a poor black man who didn't have nothin'.

Hating the burden that the white man set on him, he turned to the world of voodoo. Havin' found out that music was a kinda magic, he looked to hoodoo to take control o' it.

Robert Johnson found a root doctor deep down in the bayou, and he tried to understand about that energy that all folk got buried down in their bones. He was taught to use that energy through his guitar, by usin' the power of Legba. His songs are voodoo poetry. His soul was a beautiful and fertile one; he could never have found peace on any plantation. RJ was a genius, and those hellhounds really were inside o' him, really were on his trail.

Sure, he made a deal with the devil: his name was Legba. Robert Johnson saw "the blues falling like hail," but it was Legba who was up above, throwin' 'em down! Yep...it was Legba that gave Robert Johnson the power of the blues, but he's one mean dude, and don't like to wait too long to collect on his deals. Is it better to have the powers of a god for five years and then die, or live a life o' useless toil and pass away unknown? Most o' us make the second choice: Robert Johnson made the first—and that's why he played the guitar like a voodoo medicine man can play a possessed soul.

I guess we all heard the story about how Robert Johnson died. In August o' 1938, him and Honeyboy Edward were playin' at a house party in Three Forks, Mississippi, and the barman slipped some strychnine into Robert Johnson's glass o' whiskey fer getting too frisky with his woman. I gotta say, I believe Legba was callin' in his debt.

You know that Robert Johnson never died until three days later? And before he died, he was crawlin' along the ground on all fours, barkin' and snappin' at the moon like a mad beast. When I heard about that, I knew it was Legba, come back to reclaim one of his own.

D'ya need more convincing? I guess it's well known that Son House took Robert Johnson under his wing for a while when he was li'l more than a boy. In those days, Robert Johnson was still blowin' the harp and didn't know anything about the guitar. He left Son House for a year, and when he came back, no one could keep up with his licks anymore! See what I'm drivin' at? Robert Johnson had been studyin' under the hoodoo medicine man durin' that time. He'd been shown how to use his energy through his guitar, by becoming a disciple o' Legba. But the deal was jus' for five years. He was only twenty-seven when Legba came to take his dues.

The crossroads existed in people's minds...but Legba and the powers of voodoo were real in the story of Robert Johnson's life and death. Where else do you think he could o' got all that energy and blues from?

The Bearded Bandit

The sallow faced man moved lethargically about the kitchen of his large semi detached house in the mostly white middle class neighborhood of a town in Illinois, not far from Chicago. The man was about thirty five years of age and was irritated at having to prepare his own lunch due to the absence of his wife on school business. He had prepared a giant hamburger and fries for himself and as he greedily shoved the hot food into his mouth, he perused a ledger which included the financial records of his antique book business during the last 6 months. These figures did not seem satisfactory to the sallow faced man for he often cursed aloud as he read. Eventually, he tossed the book aside in a dismissive gesture and, having finished his afternoon carbohydrate spike, he idly allowed his hands to grip around the body of an M16 assault rifle that leaned against the wall. He caressed the body lovingly and remembered the time that he'd been one of the best police marksmen in Illinois. Those days were far in the past now, but his love of firearms remained. In fact, it was mostly the guns that gave this middle class dwelling its

distinctive character. In all the drawers and cupboards of the kitchen lay a huge variety of automatic and semi automatic handguns and long guns. Indeed, if one had inspected the house thoroughly, weapons of every kind, including grenades and even machine guns would have been easily discovered. Fortunately for the sallow faced man, none of his highly respectable neighbors suspected the quiet, book loving individual that loved children (though he had none of his own) and his vivacious and caring wife of living secret and illegal lives as ruthless bank robbers.

Still holding the M16 rifle, the sallow faced psychotic walked slowly into the next room and singled out a well worn movie DVD that would pass the time until the return of his wife from her various civic duties.

The name of the movie was “Bonnie and Clyde”.

Zachariah Winkelmann of the FBI had been called in by the Chicago police to investigate a series of daring bank robberies that had taken place in and around Chicago. The newspapers were calling the series of crimes “The Bearded Bandit Robberies” and the local Chicago police had had to admit that this particular criminal seemed to always stay several steps ahead of them. That was the reason that the FBI had been involved. So far, Winkelmann had made no startling discoveries, but his methodical examination

of the criminal's *modus operandi* had made certain points absolutely clear. First, he was a smart cookie who understood guns and almost certainly had worked for the police or a security company in the past. On various bank CCTV cameras he had been photographed holding his gun in the Weaver position—and that was a dead giveaway. Only people highly trained in the use of firearms used that highly effective stance and the criminal's knowledge of this arcane position emphasized his danger to both the public and the police. The unknown criminal always entered the banks wearing an obvious false beard and glasses and, so far, no one had been able to take a look at his real face. After a clinical cleaning out of the bank, the thief would escape in a stolen car. Once or twice the car's type and number had been noted by scared bank employees as the bearded bandit had made his getaway. However, the information had subsequently proved useless as these getaway cars were consistently abandoned a few miles from the scene of the crime--from where, presumably, another was waiting to be utilized. Fingerprints had always been wiped clean.

The more Winkelman had examined the robberies—so far there had been five of them—the more clearly he realized what an intelligent and dangerous opponent he was facing. The man took few risks and always carried a police scanner allowing him to pick up police messages in the vicinity of his crime. If Winkelman had not already been certain that he was dealing with an ex-cop, this last detail would have emphatically confirmed

it. Now, it was already three months since the bank robber's last heist and Winkelmann was getting worried that he'd moved, turned over a new leaf, or even died.

It was at this very juncture that the bearded bandit reappeared and did something that took the whole case onto a new level of intensity—for the investigation into a series of clever bank robberies was about to irrevocably change in its nature to a manhunt for the killer of a policeman.

When Jay Weekly in patrol car 6841 saw the innocuous looking Ford heading towards the South Junction at 11 AM on June the 5th, 2002, it merely registered with him that the license plate was out of date. He gave his colleague "Windy" Rider a dig in the ribs.

"Wake up, Windy. This guy ahead of us has out-of-date plates. I guess we'd better stop him and show him the error of his ways." Windy Rider grunted.

"What a damn shame," he commenced. "I joined the Police to get some action and we spend all our days chasing jay walkers and litter bugs! Let the bastard go." Jay smiled and shook his head.

"Sorry Windy, but our duty's clear. We have to stop him." The patrol car, keeping its distance, followed the battered Ford into a suburban side street where it began to slow down. Apparently

the driver had spotted the patrol car following him and he pulled up slowly next to the sidewalk.

What happened next was wholly unpredictable. The driver of the Ford got out of the car as the patrol car began to pull up behind it. He was wearing a fake beard, glasses and combat jacket. Most surprisingly of all, in his hands he carried an M16 assault rifle. In a single movement, he took aim at the braking patrol car and fired off a well directed round that shattered the police car's windscreen and made a bloody pulp of Jay Weekly's head. Next, he calmly got back into his car and drove away.

Windy Rider was left screaming in the passenger seat of the patrol car--at last in the middle of more action than even he could desire--with the brains of his friend and colleague covering him from head to foot.

Zachariah Winkelmann was excited. Surely, now, he had the bearded bandit cornered. Minutes after the shooting, an almost hysterical Windy Rider had radioed HQ with the story of what had happened. Winkelmann had known at once that they were dealing once again with the bearded bandit.

"How can you be so sure?" had enquired Captain Jonas Smith of the Chicago Police Department. Winkelmann had smiled grimly.

"It's absolutely clear, Jonas. Our target was on the way to rob a bank when he was spotted by

the unfortunate Jay Weekly. Rider tells us the plates were out of date, but our bearded bandit couldn't allow himself to get stopped for a petty felony with a stolen car full of weapons and disguises. Rather than be caught, he took a cynical decision to murder a police officer in cold blood. We'll get him now."

But the Chicago police didn't get him. A cordon of the area was set up and all cars in the vicinity closely examined. However, the murderer's battered Ford was found abandoned just a few miles from where Weekly had been shot and it was soon apparent that the bearded killer had once again slipped through the net. As before, it seemed that he had had a second car waiting, enabling him to abandon the first one and make his cool getaway in an unsuspected vehicle.

Knowing just how close he had been to terminating the bearded bandit's career, Winkelmann had been inconsolable in the aftermath of the criminal's escape.

"I have a bad feeling about this case," he had confided to Jonas Smith. "If the guy has any sense, he's going to lie low now for a long time and maybe get out of this area entirely. I think we've blown our opportunity."

Winkelmann was right to be pessimistic in the circumstances, but as things subsequently turned out, he was wrong about the bearded bandit taking a long lay off. Just six weeks later, he struck again.

After the killing of patrolman Weekly, the Chicago police force took to randomly watching suburban banks of the type that might be targeted by the bearded bandit. In spite of this logistically difficult operation, nothing of suspicion was noted by the law enforcement officers involved. However, on a suffocatingly hot day in July, Mrs. Janet French who was parked outside a branch of Citibank on Jefferson Boulevard listening to the radio news, did see something unusual. Two men with false beards and glasses—clearly in disguise—had entered the bank and, her suspicions were aroused, Mrs. French called the police and told them what she had seen. The officer who took Mrs. French's call insisted that she leave the area immediately in order to ensure her own safety.

By the time Winkelmann and the Chicago police reached the anonymous looking bank, the two bearded bandits had already fled with thousands of dollars in cash. Once again, it proved impossible to trace them due to their meticulous preparation. As before, the first car had been abandoned just blocks from the bank and they had made their escape in a second and unknown vehicle.

One thing that one of the bank workers said did give Winkelmann ample food for thought.

"Although both robbers were disguised in the same way, I am almost sure that one of them was a woman."

It now became clear to Winkelmann that as the bearded bandit obviously knew about the common methods of police procedure, he would need to do something out of the ordinary in order to catch him (or them, now that there were apparently two). Winkelmann's mind kept returning to the killer's policy of having two stolen cars ready at the scene of every crime. Surely, the Chicago police force could do something to discover these stolen vehicles in advance? All patrolmen were told to keep a particular eye open for parked stolen cars. Winkelmann guessed that the bearded bandit must steal the cars in advance of his robberies and leave them in unsuspected locations before picking them up, immediately prior to a robbery, and driving them to strategic locations. Captain Jonas Smith admitted himself to be openly skeptical of Winkelmann's plan.

"Seems to me that we're looking for a needle in a haystack. Do you really expect to get a lead from this almost arbitrary surveillance?"

Winkelmann was not unsympathetic to Smith's objections, but the bearded bandit had taken him to the limit of his detective powers and he could think of no other policy that offered even the possibility of achieving tangible results.

For more than a month nothing happened but then, in September, a policeman spotted a car with a stolen number plate parked with lots of other vehicles on a free strip of land. Just two days later, a second stolen car was found parked in a quiet cul-de-sac, about five miles from the first vehicle. Investigations soon revealed that both cars had

been recently stolen from employees who worked in large malls. Winkelmann felt sure that the bearded bandit was responsible for the theft of both vehicles and with the cooperation of Captain Jonas Smith, he set up an unobtrusive 24 hour watch on the cars. Even Smith seemed more optimistic by this time.

“Now I see why you’re in the FBI Winkelmann. I thought that idea of yours was pure baloney but it’s beginning to look like it might actually bring results!”

However, for a week nothing happened and Winkelmann began to wonder if his adversary had spotted the observation teams somehow. Risking everything on a single turn of the wheel, Winkelmann decided to plant a tracking device inside each of the two cars together with a mechanism that would shut off the engine on a given signal. For a further two nights the watch continued without success and Winkelmann was almost ready to accept that the bearded bandit must have become aware of their vigil and cancelled his plans when, on a Wednesday night at 11 PM, a large white van pulled up next to the first of the two stolen cars and a man got out. The face of the figure was obscured, but the policemen watched him produce a key, get into the car and drive off. The white van followed at a distance behind. Clearly, unaware of the watching police, the bearded bandit (for such Winkelmann was sure it was) and his accomplice was driving the car to a strategic location for their next robbery.

After the car had been parked in the suburb of Rambling Meadows, the man got back into the white van and the vehicle drove off to where the second car had been left. Here, the previous procedure was repeated and the man drove the stolen car to a location several miles from where the first car had been parked. The watching policemen noted with satisfaction that a small branch of Citibank was situated not more than a mile away from where the car was left.

Up until this point, the policemen had been able to follow the criminals from a distance by means of the tracking devices hidden in the two stolen cars. However, now that the two criminals were driving in the white van, the following policemen had to make their pursuit from a safe distance in order to ensure that they weren't spotted.

Eventually the white van pulled up outside a well-to-do semi detached house in the suburban area of St. Joseph's, not more than 50 miles from Chicago itself. Frenetic research soon showed that "Holly Meadows" belonged to a Mr. and Mrs. James Grimble who ran an antique book store not far from their house. Alison Grimble was also a big wig in the local education authority and was noted as a potential democratic candidate for state governor. James Grimble had worked in the police department ten years before but had resigned just before the state had been able to fire him for the neglect of his more overtly bureaucratic duties. In spite of this, his skill on the shooting range had been legendary and he had been among the very best shots on the force.

Winkelmann now had to decide on his next step. He could search the house and hope to find incriminating evidence on the premises or wait for the criminal couple to put their next robbery into effect and catch them in the act. After serious reflection, Winkelmann decided to take the latter course. Clearly, the couple were about to put their next robbery into operation and by simply watching and observing, the police would be able to arrest them in the exact moment that they attempted to commit their crime. Captain Jonas Smith, however, disagreed and made his objections volubly known to Winkelmann.

"This is all wrong. Why should we wait? We have everything we need on this modern day Bonnie and Clyde right now. By not acting immediately we're just giving them the chance to slip away--as they've already done so many times before." Although clearly not one hundred per cent happy with his own decision, Winkelmann shook his head robustly.

"It's best to wait Jonas. What actual proof do we have against them? At present we can only be sure of convicting them as car thieves." Jonas Smith in his turn responded vigorously to the FBI man's argument.

"Once we got inside that house, I'm willing to bet we'd find all the evidence we needed to convict them both." Zachariah Winkelmann made a face.

"We might find the evidence inside the house or we might not. In any case, we can construct a better case against the pair of them by going about

things in the way I suggest. Furthermore, I have a strong feeling that our latter day Bonnie and Clyde would not come peaceably if they knew their game was up. I wouldn't like to be responsible for the deaths of any more policemen." The old Captain pondered this for a while before replying.

"Well, maybe you're right at that," he said eventually. "It was one of the hardest things I've ever done to break the news of Weekly's death to his widow; all the while listening to his three children playing in the next room."

On the very next day at 10AM, the white van left the semi-detached house and drove to where the second car had been left. The man got out of the van, walked up to the stolen car and got inside. It was at this point that Winkelmann ordered the engine to be cut.

While Grimble was distracted by his engine failing to start, a SWAT team moved in and surrounded him. With at least five guns pointing at his head through the windscreen Grimble, who by this time was aware of his plight, made a motion toward his black bag as if to take out a weapon. Surprisingly, the SWAT team did not fire and Grimble was told to spread out his hands on the wheel. In another moment, the erstwhile bearded bandit was out of the stolen vehicle and inside the police car. One of the SWAT team expressed his surprise that Grimble had tried to go for his gun in spite of his police training.

"Man, you were really lucky that we didn't blow your head off. What made you act like that?" Grimble's reply was brief but informative.

“I thought that if you shot me in the head it would all have been over more quickly.”

When Grimble had gotten out of the white van, his wife had immediately driven off and she knew nothing of the drama that had later unfolded. However, she was carefully trailed by a patrol car and after about fifteen minutes she had begun to make a lot of abrupt turns. At this point, the following policemen rightly concluded that Alison Grimble had spotted them and radioed to HQ for back up.

“This bitch is wise to us. We need help.”

The chase that followed seemed almost surreal in its combination of a life and death struggle down well-to-do, leafy, suburban streets. Alison Grimble was determined that she wasn't giving herself up and at speeds of more than a hundred miles an hour she rattled off round after round from her ugly M16 automatic rifle. One pursuing driver was mortally wounded and crashed into the wall of a building at a speed of more than 100 miles per hour, instantly killing the colleague who sat next to him.

At last, the white van was cornered down a one-way street and the pursuing policemen waited for the final scene in the drama to play itself out. Alison Grimble, aware that she now had no chance of escape, turned her van around and drove it straight at the mass of police cars that by this time blocked the only entrance out of the cul-de-

sac. Faced with no other choice, the waiting policemen fired en-masse at the approaching vehicle, bursting tires and shattering the windscreen into a thousand shards of jagged glass. With a terrible screech, the white van lurched over to one side and, with a shuddering crash, turned over three times. Inside the vehicle, Alison Grimble's body was found with at least twenty bullets in it.

"Fucking bitch got just what she deserved," observed one large policeman on the eerily silent scene of the tragic shoot out. He had been a close friend of the two men who had died in the chase and tears sprung to his eyes as he thought of his colleagues' wives and children--at that moment still ignorant of the fact that their men had died "in the line of duty" as the papers and politicians say.

James Grimble proved himself to be a man of few words during his lengthy period in police custody. At first, Winkelmann struggled to identify the highly intelligent ex policeman in the unresponsive piece of meat that often seemed to sit in front of him. Finally, however, the FBI man concluded that Grimble had sunk into a deep depression since being caught. Everything about the middle class home full of firearms, ammunition and gangster movies suggested that the Grimbles had never intended to be taken alive in the event of imminent capture. Alison Grimble had fulfilled her part of the pact but, for whatever reason, Grimble himself had been taken.

The sessions with Grimble eventually became tediously repetitive to Winkelmann.

“Why did you need all that money Grimble?”

“Who doesn’t need money?”

“Sure, but most people don’t kill policemen and rob banks to get it.”

A non-committal shake of the head.

“Come on Grimble, why are you wasting our time? Be more cooperative and we might be able to help you.”

A momentary gleam of sarcasm in the eyes.

“Help me into the electric chair you mean? I know what happens to cop killers.”

“Are you sorry for what you did Grimble?”

Another non-committal shake of the head.

In any case, it was clear that Grimble was as guilty as hell and it wasn’t expected that his trial would last very long. Even after the first week, it was clear as daylight that the police had a perfect case against James Grimble, having even found his guns and disguises inside the stolen car in which he had been arrested.

About two weeks into the trial, a handcuffed Grimble was coming down in the court room elevator with his solitary guard and a group of court employees and journalists when somehow he managed to slip off the cuffs unbeknown to his guard. How he managed to do this nobody is quite sure, but possibly he had somehow managed to grease his wrists in the lavatory or hide away some tool which he was later able to use as a pick. Suffice to say, that when the elevator reached the ground floor and the people began to tumble out,

Grimble was able to surprise his guard, overpower him and take his gun. Without a moment's hesitation, Grimble pressed the weapon's barrel to the policeman's head and blew his brains out.

As people screamed and attempted to flee, Grimble made a determined effort to reach the nearest exit, but a passing Federal Officer, Albert Gandolfini, saw what was happening and moved in to confront the killer. By this time, Grimble was careless of all personal danger and quickly fired several bullets into the body of the approaching officer. Mortally wounded, the law enforcement agent slumped to the floor; but even in his dying moment he was able to fire off four shots at Grimble and incapacitate him. At this point, the police rallied and easily overpowered the escaped criminal. An ambulance was summoned and both men were taken to the state hospital. Gandolfini was already dead and Grimble was dying. By the time the ambulance reached the hospital both men were dead.

In the light of these tragic events, Zachariah Winkelmann often used to remember that slight movement of Grimble towards his gun when he had first been taken by the SWAT team and wish with all his heart that one of the men had taken the opportunity to blow James Grimble's head off.

Madam Zero

I'd heard a lot about Madam Zero's séances. Tonight I'd experience one for myself. I didn't believe in such nonsense, of course. But I was being well paid to attend and feign interest. The séance began with us holding hands around a circular table in the dark.

"Is anybody there?" Madam Zero boomed in a commanding voice. "Tell me who you are."

Nothing happened for a moment. Then, the single flickering candlestick started rising unsteadily from the center of the table, and a chilling, cackling laughter filled the room.

"Who are you?" roared Madam Zero in a peremptory manner.

"I am your worst nightmare come true," returned a high-pitched voice from somewhere above the room's center.

"I *never* sleep," said Madam Zero triumphantly.

"Ha-ha-ha," came the reply. "Not yours, Madam, but another's."

“Whose?” barked the medium in a voice that seemed well used to making the denizens of the spiritual world come to heel.

“An old, fat man. He has paid for a proxy to be present tonight. But he must come in person...to take his just deserts.”

“His name! Tell us his name!” screamed Madam Zero. I’d heard enough. Extracting my handgun from its shoulder holster, I blazed away at the area from which the disembodied voice appeared to emanate. My pistol’s fiery cracks flared like heavy artillery on a starless night. I think I fired three times in all. Pandemonium broke loose around me. I heard Madam Zero’s calm, authoritative voice through it all.

“Fool! Put your gun away. You cannot harm a spirit that dwells in the ethereal realm.” The lights were hastily switched on. I found myself looking at three bullet holes, clustered neatly around the candelabra in the center of the ceiling.

“Who the hell are you? And what the devil are you actually here for?” shouted a man’s voice opposite me. It belonged to an elderly, gray-haired gentleman, with a monocle in his right eye.

“He is a paid assassin, Colonel. A Nobody,” asserted Madam Zero. “As the spirit told us, he is merely a proxy for another, much sought-after man. One who’s committed foul actions that stink from here to high heaven.” I decided that the moment of action had passed. And besides, that voice had given me the creeps.

“I wish I knew what you were referring to, Madam Zero,” I said loudly. “I don’t know how

you performed your little trick, but I'm sure Mr. Kingston will have an opinion on the matter. Be seeing you all." There was a strained silence as I moved to the door. Madam Zero broke it, and her parting words were chilling.

"Tell Mr. Kingston that I'm waiting for him...and so are the others."

I attempted a raucous laugh.

"*You're waiting for him?* Good one. Don't worry, Madam Zero. He's been watching you. In my opinion, he'll be with you sooner than you'd like!" I opened the door and stalked out. Taking the elevator to street level, I emerged onto the frozen sidewalk and stopped to light a cigarette. My hand was shaking. That high-pitched voice had seemed so real. And what the hell did I know? Maybe there really was something to all this supernatural mumbo-jumbo.

I hailed a cab and gave the driver a hotel address on Lexington Avenue. Entering the plush foyer, I headed straight to the desk.

"I'm here to see Mr. Kingston," I told a weedy specimen in a red coat at least two sizes larger than he was.

"Mr. Kingston?" he said. "Please wait a moment. I'll see if he's available."

"He's always available for me," I replied, and smiled unpleasantly. Two minutes later, I was heading to the seventh floor in an empty elevator. I was curious to see what Kingston would make of the séance at Madam Zero's. Personally, it had me rattled. One of Kingston's goons was waiting, and I was ushered into a plush suite of rooms. Must

have cost someone a lot of dollars, I thought wryly. Probably Kingston calling in another favor.

"Wait here," the goon commanded. I slumped obediently into a comfortable, and very expensive, armchair. A minute later Kingston entered, and I stood up to shake his hand.

"Tell me about what happened tonight, Digger" he said gruffly. "You look a little pale, so I assume she tried one of her tricks on you." For a moment, I considered the fat, complacent old man standing in front of me. Dispassionately. In spite of everything I knew about his activities, I didn't hate him. After all, he funded my rather exorbitant lifestyle. His dollars paid for my peculiar interests, and I guessed that without them I'd either be in jail or in a lunatic asylum. Kingston was my mentor, my patron—and my boss.

"Mr. Kingston...that woman gives me the willies. Something crazy happened there tonight. Someone spoke...and laughed. He said that a proxy was present for an old fat man, but that the man would have to come himself. I stopped listening at that point, and let him have it with my iron. Then the light came on, but all I could see were three bullet holes in the ceiling. I decided the best thing to do was to leave." Kingston's false *bon-homie* had completely vanished by this point. His old man's face was creased up in thought...and something else. Maybe fear: but I'd never known Kingston to get scared before.

"What was the last thing she said to you?"

“She said that she was waiting for you. And that the others were waiting, too.” In an instant, his suave manner returned.

“Then let’s not disappoint her, Digger. We’ll pay Madam Zero another visit.”

“Now? But all those high-society types she wanted to show off to will be long gone.”

“Which is why, my dear Digger, it’s an excellent time to catch her. She is unprepared. Trickless.”

‘Trickless’—that was a new one on me, but sometimes Kingston’s Slavic roots showed through, and I’d learned to ignore them. Besides, I had other concerns. I was sure that there was something I didn’t quite understand about all this. But there was no time for further thought.

“Anything you like, Mr. Kingston,” I replied briskly. “You pay the salary.”

It was just past midnight when we arrived outside Madam Zero’s apartment. A reddish light was still burning at her window, and a low muttering was audible from within. One voice was clearly that of Madam Zero, but it was the sound of the other voice that made my heart beat uncomfortably fast. It was high-pitched and agitated, exactly like the spectral voice I’d heard earlier that evening. I looked to Kingston for the signal and he nodded. My pistol shattered the lock with a single shot. As we burst into the room, there was a gasp of surprise, and hurried movement. Nothing was clear in the dim red light. I instinctively fired several shots in the direction of a moving figure, and was gratified to hear a scream. A human scream,

nothing supernatural about it. The light clicked on, and spread before us was a pleasing sight.

Madam Zero sat at the same table at which the séance had been conducted earlier that evening. She was staring in fear at the smoking gun I held in my hand. The chair opposite her had been pushed back. Next to it, a man's body lay stretched out on the floor, leaking blood from several bullets to the chest. He was clearly dead.

"Lovely to see you again, my dear," came Kingston's smoothly sarcastic tone from behind me. "It's been far too long. Why didn't you keep in touch?" A vicious snarl puckered up Madam Zero's face, as her fear gave way to anger.

"What a monster you are, Sasha."

"Now, now, Lena. You exaggerate. I am only a man who always does what is necessary. Is that such a bad thing, Lena? Or would you prefer me to call you Madam Zero?" Her eyes bored into Kingston's like gimlets, and an icy silence followed. I looked in astonishment at Madam Zero, and then back at Kingston.

"You two know each other?" Madam Zero gave a stifled laugh before she spoke.

"Yes, we know each other. We are, after all, man and wife."

"What?" I cried incredulously. "You've got to be kidding!"

"I wish I was," returned Madam Zero in a serious tone. "Ten years ago, Sasha and I lived as husband and wife in St. Petersburg. Sasha, Kingston to you, was Number Two in the local Mafia. I found myself a better man. His brother, Vladimir.

But when Sasha discovered our affair, he ignored family bonds and murdered him. He would have killed me too if I hadn't escaped to Moscow. Some years later, I learned that he'd come to America and I followed him. I planned to fulfill my dream of revenge against a husband I had come to hate." She shook her head. "I never realized that Vladimir would actually contact me from the other world and beg me to clear his name. If I agreed to help, he promised to give me information that he said would be crucial to me."

"And what was needed to clear Vladimir's name?" I asked skeptically.

"He asked me to admit to Sasha that it was not he that I had an affair with. Vladimir was innocent," she said, smiling ruefully. "I had lied to Sasha in order to protect my true lover, who thanked me for my loyalty by deserting me when I needed him most."

"Who was this treacherous lover?" I asked unpleasantly.

"It was you, Josef. Sasha's best friend".

"Lena.... What are you saying?" cried Kingston with amazement. "This is Digger. My loyal American aide. He knows nothing of Vladimir or Josef."

"What a fool you are, Sasha," shouted Lena. "Don't you realize that he followed you to America, knowing that I too had come? He feared that I might contact you and reveal that he was actually the guilty one. So he had plastic surgery before leaving Russia and reappeared on your doorstep shortly after, posing as the New York criminal,

Stacy Digger. An easy enough role for Josef, as his mother was American." I had been smiling confidently through Madam Zero's expose.

"And how exactly would you know all of this, Madam Zero?" I said enquiringly.

"Vladimir," she replied. "He informed me of your actions."

"I see," I said, and smiled indulgently. "An interesting theory, Madam Zero. Unfortunately, it doesn't stand up to inspection. You see, we heard the spooky voice while we were outside your door." I pointed casually at the dead man. "And it belonged to your friend here, with the bullets in his chest. It was the same voice I'd heard earlier tonight when, if you recall, your monocled friend was also present. At first, you really got me going. It sounded exactly like Vladimir's voice. However, now I understand that it was just some kind of ventriloquist act by your dead boyfriend. I should have realized immediately. He was speaking in English, after all."

"You fool," snarled Madam Zero. "Do you think that a tormented spirit is limited by mere human language? Each person understands as he is able to. I tell you the truth. The voice you heard earlier this evening was Vladimir's. Before you broke in, my friend and I were doing our best to persuade him to let us handle things the way we thought best. And we were succeeding, before your dramatic entry." Without warning, a pistol flashed and Madam Zero sank to her knees, screaming in agony. It was Kingston who'd fired. I looked at him in horror.

“She lied to me,” he said quietly. “It wasn’t Vladimir at all. I killed my own brother for *nothing*. It was you all along, wasn’t it, Josef?” I laughed, though I was far from amused.

“Surely you don’t believe that nonsense, Mr. Kingston? I know nothing of this Josef, or St. Petersburg.” Kingston was smiling grimly.

“Then tell me, Digger, how did you know that Vladimir had a high-pitched voice?”

“Why, I guessed of course, Mr. Kingston.”

“Don’t give me that, Josef,” he said, shaking his head slowly. You insisted that the voice had sounded ‘exactly like Vladimir’s.’ And now you’re going to pay, my ‘dear friend.’ *Da svydanya.*” I flung myself desperately to the floor as Kingston fired. Despite my speedy action, a bullet singed across the skin of my left shoulder blade. A second slower and it would have been my heart. I rolled along the floor and pulled my own handgun from its shoulder holster. Taking as careful an aim as I could manage, I fired at the fat torso in front of me. Sasha’s corpulent body sank to the floor like a punctured zeppelin. I rose to my feet slowly. My left shoulder was drenched in blood. Surveying the three dead bodies, I began to think hard. I had to get away. Maybe, if I left quickly enough, Stacy Digger could disappear into obscurity...perhaps I could even return to Russia. Suddenly, something set my heart shivering with fear. It was the sound of drawn-out, cackling laughter: the same that I’d heard earlier that evening.

“What’s that? Who’s there?” I shouted. The disembodied voice of Kingston’s brother, Vladimir, responded from the upper center of the room.

“Don’t you recognize my voice, Josef? Look behind the curtains. Maybe that will make you believe...” Desperately, I switched my glance from the three bullet holes in the ceiling to the curtains concealing the window. They rustled ominously, and a figure emerged. Vladimir had not been preserved too well. Not much flesh was left under the soggy brown overcoat dripping seaweed and salt water onto Madam Zero’s expensive Turkish carpet. A rope was tied around his skeletal neck and hung down to the floor, dragging heavily behind him. Attached to the end of it was the branch of a tree. I remembered that the stories circulated at the time of his death had suggested that he’d been hanged and then dumped in the river. The body had never been recovered. But it was Vladimir’s face that horrified me the most. His nose and ears had been cut off and both eyes had been gouged out. The Russian Mafia’s calling card. Despite that, he still knew where I stood, and was heading straight toward me.

“Stand back, Vladimir,” I shouted, my voice cracking with fear. “I’m sorry about what happened to you, but I wasn’t involved. It was all Lena’s fault. Stay back, or I’ll shoot.” The monstrosity opened its bestial mouth and spoke.

“Josef. I died for your crime. My brother’s love was turned to hatred. And now, you have caused the death of the only two people I ever

loved. It is your turn to die.” I pointed the gun meaningfully at the monster’s head.

“Stay back you fiend, or I’ll fire.” His horrible, cackling laughter filled the room.

“Fire to your heart’s content, Josef. It won’t make any difference.” I emptied my remaining bullets into the fearsome creature approaching me with his bony arms outstretched. He didn’t seem to feel a thing. His skeletal hands closed vice-like around my throat and my gun clattered to the floor. The horrible, cackling laughter, lunatic and demonic, was the last thing I heard before darkness began closing in.

Four bodies in Madam Zero’s apartment were found some days later. Several visitors had called on her, hoping to have their fortunes told. Eventually her lack of response had alarmed, or irritated, someone enough to call the police. Three people, including Madam Zero herself, had been shot. The fourth, apparently the murderer, had seemingly suffered a heart attack before being able to leave the apartment. A rope found around his throat had baffled the police, and they suspected that foul play had somehow been involved. However, doctor’s reports and the autopsy finally convinced them that whatever the significance of the rope, the gunman had undoubtedly died from natural causes.

Mbala's Voodoo Party

Do you believe in voodoo? I didn't, but the strange events of the last three months forced me to revise my point of view. I now know that voodoo is a reality, and that we are all at risk of becoming members of the living dead, better known as Zombies.

Our nightmare began when my wife and I found that we couldn't have children. I was prepared to accept this blow as an act of God, but my wife, Elena, couldn't. She began to pine away, and eventually reached the point where she was ready to jump at any quackery that held out the chance of giving her a child. She somehow got the name of a voodoo priestess in Philadelphia who, it seemed, had been known to help other childless couples. She was determined to investigate further, and before long, she was visiting the voodoo 'congregation' of sister Mbala at least three times weekly. At first, I thought little of my wife's dedication to sister Mbala. I knew that she'd been devastated by the news that she was unable to bear children, and I felt that anything which helped her to overcome the issue would be a positive influ-

ence in her life. How wrong I was! Unbeknown to me, sister Mbala had turned my wife into a devotee of the powerful serpent god, Dambala (said to be, amongst other things, a god of fertility). I was later told that drugs had been administered to my poor wife, and she had joined in ecstatic ceremonies in celebration of the serpent god. It was believed that powerful demons possessed the bodies and souls of the participants. Whether this was true, or the outward manifestations of lunacy were invoked by the use of particular drugs, I cannot with any certainty say. At the time, all I knew was that my wife began to withdraw into a distant place where I played no part, and I began to harbor serious suspicions about sister Mbala's voodoo congregation.

One day my wife hit me with a bombshell. She wanted us to visit Haiti, the western world's "voodoo Mecca," with sister Mbala and other members of the congregation. Sister Mbala intended to perform certain magical rituals there, which she believed might stimulate fertility in my wife. I hardly knew what to say. I didn't want my wife to get any deeper into all this mumbo-jumbo, but I was well aware that opposition from me at this stage would only harden her resolve against me and make her want to go alone. I reluctantly agreed to accompany her to Haiti, but I'd become thoroughly alarmed by sister Mbala's mind games by this stage, and my real intention in accompanying my wife was to wean her away from this woman's lunacy.

The entire congregation, myself now included, stayed at the beautiful Caribbean Sands Hotel in Port Au Prince. The first few days of our stay were idyllic enough, as sister Mbala was busy with the acquisition of various plants and herbs to adorn and enhance the upcoming celebrations. Little did I then realize that our stay in Haiti would develop into a life and death struggle, with the souls of my wife and myself as the prize. Once sister Mbala had acquired her esoteric materials, the character of our stay changed. Elena began to spend very little time with me, and instead frequented all of sister Mbala's worldly and ecstatic celebrations. After a few days, I could see the change. She seemed to take little pleasure from being with me anymore, seeming to live only to participate in sister Mbala's orgiastic rites. I tried to convince her that we should leave this place, and escape sister Mbala's evil influence. She only smiled in a distant manner, and reminded me that with sister Mbala's help, we would be able to have the child for which we both longed. I was unconvinced, but my wife possessed a touching faith in the voodoo priestess' powers, and there was nothing I could say to disillusion her.

After a week, I noticed a fundamental shift in my wife's behavior. She was now performing her duties with sister Mbala for at least eight hours a day, and returning home tired and irritable. I couldn't help but feel that my presence was superfluous to her. If I asked her any questions about what she was doing with the voodoo mistress, she would fly into a rage and tell me to mind my own

business. I felt that I didn't know her anymore. Sister Mbala was taking her away from me. I made a decision to fight back, whatever the consequences to myself.

On several occasions, I'd seen my wife slip out of bed and leave the hotel between two and three in the morning. I decided to follow her the next time in order to observe the practices indulged in by sister Mbala's initiates. Perhaps some light would be shed on the reasons for Elena's change of character. I never for a moment conceived of the horrible and evil discoveries that I would make as a result.

At about three the following morning, I felt Elena slip silently out of bed. I pretended to be asleep until she left our apartment, and then jumped out of bed myself. Pulling on trousers, shoes, and a pullover, I hastily followed her. There was no sight of her as I emerged into the corridor. I ran down the stairs to the frontal foyer, noting that the reception desk was unoccupied, although it should have been manned all night. I hurried outside, looking quickly to right and left, and was just in time to see Elena disappearing around a corner of the hotel. I hurriedly followed, concerned that I might lose her if I didn't move quickly.

I'd kept on her trail for about a kilometer when we finally reached the heart of one of the poorest areas of the Haitian capital. I found myself surrounded by a kind of voodoo shantytown. Various voodoo deities adorned the entrance of every hut, and I could hear drums beating. In a

central clearing, my wife had joined a group of about twenty devotees. I immediately recognized sister Mbala in the center. I hid behind a wall and watched, aghast. The participants in this unholy rite sat on the ground in a circle, and sister Mbala intoned certain voodoo incantations while herbs were passed round for consumption. I began to notice a change in the character of the company, and soon they stood up and began dancing around a central fire while sister Mbala continued chanting her rhythmic incantations. Elena seemed completely lost to me as I watched her in that frenzied and demonic dance of spiritual possession. She was writhing in contorted shapes, in time to the incantations of sister Mbala and the regular drum beats of the players. In that moment, I sensed that her very soul was threatened. Thinking of nothing else, I sprang up, and broke into the hellish dance of death, taking my wife's hand in an attempt to pull her away with me. Imagine my astonishment when she immediately struck me a vicious blow on the side of the head, and the congregation began raining blows on me from every direction.

When I came to my senses, I was tied to a central post, and my wife and the other members of sister Mbala's frenzied group were dancing around me in a lascivious, frenzied manner. Sister Mbala stood a little to one side, smiling at me evilly. In her left hand was a little doll, dressed in similar clothes to my own. In her right hand she held a large pin. Suddenly, she plunged the pin into the doll's leg. I simultaneously felt a tremendous pain shooting through my own right leg. It

was so intense that I almost fainted. Sister Mbala's head was thrown back, and she was laughing demonically. Again, she plunged the needle into the doll, this time the arm, and again I experienced the searing pain in my corresponding limb. The pain was so intense this time that I swooned into unconsciousness.

When I came to, I was alone in the daylight. The demonic revelers had long since disappeared, and some people already going about their business stared at me curiously as I lay there, slumped on the hard ground, in the shadow of a large shack. I seemed to have recovered my physical well-being, so I staggered to my feet and returned to the hotel, only to discover that my wife was gone. When she still hadn't appeared by midday, I contacted the police.

I informed them that I'd traveled to Haiti with sister Mbala and her group. It seemed that the entire congregation had disappeared along with my wife. I was alone—and due to my undeniable connections with Mbala and her congregation, the police were inclined to believe that I somehow had something to do with the mass disappearance. I finally convinced them of my innocence, and was left to mull things over in my hotel room. They had informed me that sister Mbala was a well-known practitioner of a forbidden form of voodoo, and that it was quite possible that she'd turned my wife and the others into zombies. When I inquired what a zombie was, the policeman investigating the disappearance had laughed loudly. His answer, however, was serious enough.

“A zombie? It’s a dead person, who does the bidding of the voodoo master.”

“Do you mean to say that my wife is already dead?” I asked in horror.

“Perhaps. But she may only be possessed by a demon soul. That’s the other way to make a zombie.”

I spent the rest of that day mulling over all the facts minutely. Was it really possible, in the twenty-first century, that my wife was possessed by voodoo demons? By evening, the police had discovered nothing further and I was told to rest. They were hoping to have news by morning. It was, after all, difficult to hide twenty zombies indefinitely!

It was at least two in the morning when I finally fell asleep. I awoke an hour later, with terrible pains searing through my legs and arms. I tried to move, but couldn’t. Of course, I realized what this meant. Sister Mbala was making a more determined effort to rid herself of someone intent on spoiling her fun. After I’d experienced the anguish of sister Mbala’s pins and needles for about half an hour, I heard a noise, low and stealthy. It was the sound of my door slowly opening, even though I’d locked it carefully before going to sleep. I saw Sister Mbala’s ominous figure framed in the dull light from the corridor. Elena stood at her shoulder. Sister Mbala crept slowly into the room and my wife, staring glassily in front of her, followed stiffly. Mbala proceeded to point to the bed, and passed the edge of her hand quickly across her throat in a telling gesture. My wife turned and be-

gan to walk slowly toward me. She was obviously completely under Mbala's fiendish control. Would she really go so far as to kill me? The thing that had been Elena, hands outstretched, stooped down to clutch at me. I could do nothing as I felt the cold, zombie fingers grasp at my exposed throat and begin to squeeze. The icy fingers possessed the strength of a demon. I knew that my time was short. With virtually my last breath, I stuttered out my wife's name and an exhortation.

"Elena...please...don't do it." It was as though an electric shock had passed through her body. Suddenly, she looked at me with understanding, and I could clearly read the horror in her eyes. She immediately took her frozen hands from my throat and quickly advanced on sister Mbala herself, who was screaming various spells and incantations at her, but to no effect. Elena clutched sister Mbala around the throat, and with a single jerk, broke her neck. I heard the crack distinctly. As sister Mbala slumped to the floor, quite dead, Elena turned and looked at me. After a few seconds she collapsed as if dead. With sister Mbala's passing, my own movements were once again under control. I leapt out of the bed and bent down by my wife's side, taking her head gently in my arms. She was breathing regularly, and as I muttered my thanks to the Divine Creator, her eyes flickered open.

"Silas...is that you?" she murmured softly, feeling my face uncertainly with her hands.

“Yes, Elena, and thanks be to God that we’ve survived the evil and demonic plotting of that wretched woman, Mbala.”

We left Port au Prince forty-eight hours later. The police detained us for a while in their attempt to discover exactly how the tragedy had happened. The other nineteen members of the voodoo congregation had been found dead in a mountain cave. It seemed that several of them had been killed and eaten prior to a general orgy of sex and mutilation, in which all of the others had died. The police estimated that the events had taken place between the hours of twelve and two on the night that I’d received my visitation. My wife’s life had apparently been temporarily spared so that she could kill me before suffering the same fate as the others. Now, it was the voodoo queen herself that lay dead with her unfortunate followers. Elena’s love had proved too strong to be controlled by voodoo powers, saving both our lives at the crucial moment. We left Haiti with the firm intention never to return again.

POSTSCRIPT: Two months after our departure from Haiti, Elena fell pregnant.

No Comebacks

I felt uneasy waiting for Abdul Aziz in the lobby of the five-star Sahara Hotel in Riyadh. What if he wasn't prepared to help me? But that was impossible, really. He had no choice but to help me. He finally approached my table and sat down. I ordered two Turkish coffees, noting that he looked wearier than usual.

"So, how is everything, Abdul Aziz?" I asked. The Arab responded with a grunt. He seemed pre-occupied, so I tried again. "It was good of you to come, Abdul Aziz. Not everybody would have." This time he looked me in the eyes. His distaste was obvious.

"I did not intend to come, Mr. David. I was determined not to. Your threat changed all that." I smiled and shook my head.

"You are exaggerating, Abdul Aziz. I am not threatening you. I just want your support at a difficult time. After all, we're old friends." I watched the Arab's hand move inside the pocket of the *thobe* he was wearing. It emerged with a pistol in its grip, displayed in such a way that only I could see it.

“You will come outside with me, Mr. David. My car is waiting.” It seemed I had little choice, so I rose and began walking in the indicated direction. I knew that the Arab wasn’t bluffing. Knowing what I had on him, he’d prefer to kill us both than to let me speak.

“Take it easy, Abdul Aziz. Why all the fuss? Just help me in the way I indicated, and I’ll be out of Saudi Arabia in twenty-four hours. There won’t be any comebacks.” The Saudi smiled grimly.

“You are right, Mr. David. There will not be any comebacks. If I follow your instructions, I would never sleep easily again, knowing, as I would, that you could speak against me at any time.” My plan had backfired. I’d gotten out of that damned Saudi jail by intelligence and stealth. Now, it seemed that Abdul Aziz was intent on finding a permanent solution to his problems.

“Look Abdul Aziz, did I say anything about you while I was in the can? I could have sung at any time.” The Arab shook his head.

“Not really, my friend. We would both have been for the executioner’s block if you’d spoken against me in jail. Although I must admit that I felt constant unease about the fact that desperation might eventually make you speak. This time, I’m going to ensure your silence.”

We’d been slowly walking to the hotel’s main exit during our exchange. I could see the ugly bulge of Abdul Aziz’s pistol in his *thobe*, and I knew that calling for help would simply destroy us both. Outside the hotel, he motioned for me to climb into his waiting jeep. I had to do something.

I knew that it was the Arab's intention to murder me in some quiet place, and I didn't have much time. The Saudi quickly got in, turned the ignition key, and the jeep began moving slowly along the hotel driveway. It suddenly hit me that this was probably my best chance. We were already out of sight of the hotel porters, but not yet an item of curiosity for the motorists and pedestrians on the main highway. Assuring myself that it was a good decision, I crashed my elbow into the side of Abdul Aziz's head, and he slumped across the seat as if he'd been pole-axed. I felt feverishly in the pocket of his *thobe* and extracted the pistol. The jeep shuddered to a halt as I thrust my foot onto the brake pedal and then put on the hand brake. The Saudi was beginning to mutter in Arabic as he came round and I decided to make things short and sweet. I put the pistol to his head, squeezed the trigger, and watched Abdul Aziz's brains splatter over the roof of the jeep. Next, I bundled the corpse into the back, and threw a red blanket over it. Finally, I squeezed into the driver's seat and started the stalled engine. I came up to the main highway slowly, turned right at the first opportunity, and tried to lose myself in the endless stream of traffic.

I was in a tough predicament. My only chance was to make for the northern border and get out of Saudi Arabia through Jordan. I didn't have a passport, and I couldn't afford to have the car searched with a corpse in the back. It seemed that the long trip ahead offered no better than a fifty-fifty chance of survival, even if I dumped the body

along the way. It was probably a good idea to call ahead to Tel Aviv. I keyed in the number on my stolen mobile.

“Hello?”

“This is West 0012,” I said curtly. “With half decent luck, I’ll be out of here inside fifteen hours. Can you get someone to meet me in Jordan?”

“No problem 0012, we’ll get back to you with precise information.” Things were finally falling into place. After spending more than three years in a Saudi prison, I might be out in less than a day. I returned my attention to driving, and instinctively began to slow down as I noticed an old Arab woman trying to cross the road ahead of me. I shuddered as I felt the great crash of a white Cadillac ploughing into the back of the jeep. An irate Saudi driver hurled open his door and stormed up to the jeep, where I sat waiting for him with the window open. He began screaming at me in Arabic, and I shook my head to indicate that I didn’t understand anything.

“*Laa afham.*” He realized that I was a westerner, and began to speak in broken, but expressive, English.

“You are stupid idiot. Where you learn to drive? Why you slow down in front of me?” I knew I didn’t have an answer that would satisfy him. For a moment, I considered just driving on, but then I’d have the traffic cops on my tail within minutes. I decided that the best thing to do was to lie.

“I’m sorry, my friend,” I said apologetically. “I think I’m having a heart attack.” The Saudi

looked ready to explode. "You liar. You not have heart attack. Stupid idiot! Police come now, and put you in jail." It was time for desperate measures again, and I reached for the pistol inside my pocket. The Arab somehow anticipated my thoughts. He thrust his fist violently into the side of my head, and reached inside the window to open my door. Shouting something in Arabic, he smashed his fist into the side of my head again. In response to his call, five or six Saudis now surrounded my car. As I tried to recover, the Arab felt inside my coat and extracted the pistol. He looked suspiciously around the interior of the jeep. Noticing the red blanket in the back, he removed it to reveal Abdul Aziz's corpse. An old Arab standing in the group began to wail and invoke the mercy of Allah. My nemesis looked me directly in the eye, and spoke.

"Mister, you worse than stupid idiot," he said, quietly and solemnly. "You walking dead man." And I knew he was right.

Sweet Home Theravada

I'd been a Buddhist for nearly three years now, but I was finding that my good intentions were becoming increasingly hard to maintain. I was hoping that this trip to my spiritual homeland of Thailand to meet with my good friend and Buddhist mentor, Chuchat, would help.

Chuchat had homes in both Thoen, which was in the province of Lampang, far to the north of Thailand, and in Bangkok. We were reunited at the airport in Bangkok, and after meeting with his wife and sons, he set me up in a hotel close to his home; one where the management wasn't too particular about young ladies coming and going at odd times. Everything was going well. In a couple of days, Chuchat and I would drive down to Thoen and see how our computer business was progressing. I'd paid for a few computers, and Chuchat had set up an Internet café next to his house. It was doing good business, as a couple of colleges were situated nearby.

Then John Smith arrived, and my sufferings began. Smith was an acquaintance of Chuchat. He worked in Dubai, and that's where they'd met. It

seems that he would periodically abuse my friend's generous nature by arriving unannounced, and expecting him to work as a skivvy for him. Smith was grossly obese, and had a lame leg, which necessitated him carrying an old gnarled stick. When he became excited, he would twirl it around his body dangerously. He did three things well: eat, sleep, and drink beer.

On Smith's arrival, Chuchat put him in the same hotel as me. I quickly discovered that he made no conversation at all unless the topic was food, or drink. One day, he pontificated about the local beers.

"Singha is by far the best beer to be found here. The hops are grown in special circumstances, and the fermentation period is considerably longer than usual. You'll find more expensive beers to be only half as good."

"For goodness sake, Smith," I burst out irritably, "don't you ever think about anything except your stomach? Why don't you get yourself a woman while you're here?" For a moment, Smith looked thoughtful, and then he slowly nodded his head.

"Yes, it might not be a bad idea. I suppose Chuchat can arrange everything?"

"Chuchat can help with the language. You pick the girl up yourself. If you like, we can go to Soi Cowboy and find you someone now." Smith heaved up the mass of flesh that composed his body and waved his stick in the air excitedly.

"What are we waiting for, my boy? Let's go." The following events were so disastrous that they

don't bear mentioning. Suffice to say that Smith embarrassed himself, and all of those with him, and finally came home. Alone.

Chuchat and I were due to leave for Thoen the following afternoon. I had thought that this would mean saying our last goodbye to Smith, but I had reckoned without the thickness of his skin, coupled with his proven ability to spoil everyone else's party. When he heard of our planned trip, he promptly declared his intention of accompanying us and staying at Chuchat's home in Thoen for a while.

"My plans are free and flexible," he informed us, unnecessarily. "I don't have to please anyone but myself." If I had been in Chuchat's shoes, I would have told Smith to go and drown himself in beer, but Chuchat had always been more considerate than I. He accepted the change in plan without demur, and even enquired whether Smith would be quite comfortable in the back seat of his pick-up for 350 kilometers. Smith snorted with indignation.

"Can't you see that I'm a cripple, Chuchat? How on earth do you think it's possible for me to stay in the back seat of that thing for such a distance?" When all was said and done, Chuchat assured Smith that he would borrow his son's car for the trip, allowing our obese guest the comfort of the ample back seat. Smith grunted his assent to the plan. It seemed that he regarded Chuchat's new arrangements as no more than his due. For my part, I felt outraged by Smith's determination to stay with us, but if Chuchat could put up with

him, it was obviously not for me to change his mind.

We set out that afternoon with Chuchat and I in front and Smith, complaining, in the back. I was not looking forward to the next 350 kilometers, and my fears proved to be well grounded. Chuchat and I had arranged to stop at Sukhotai (the old capital of Thailand) for a couple of hours, but this didn't fit in with Smith's plans at all.

"What's the point of that?" he complained. "This journey is long enough at 350 kilometers. The important thing is to get to Thoen as soon as possible. Then we can relax, and prepare to eat at our leisure." I blinked at Smith inimically.

"Is food and beer the only thing you ever think about?" Chuchat looked at me reproachfully. Smith wasn't my guest, and in consequence, it wasn't for me to abuse him. I sank into a moody silence until we reached Sukhotai, and Chuchat turned into a big car park.

"What?" roared our friend Smith. "You're actually stopping at this stinking pile of old bricks?"

"Very sorry, Smith," declared Chuchat soothingly. "We only stay little while. Most interesting place." Smith made a sound like the air rushing out of a balloon that I believe was meant to convey his scorn and contempt, but Chuchat had decided to stop, and there was nothing that he could do about it.

We stayed in Sukhotai rather longer than we'd intended. Smith ensconced himself on a bench with a couple of bottles of beer and insisted that he would stay there until we'd finished. It was

an offer too good to pass up. We promptly forgot his existence, and began to enjoy the sights. We took a ride on top of a great elephant, and caught a glimpse of Smith on his bench, just draining the last drops of liquid from his second bottle of Singha. By the time we rejoined him, it was already dusk, and the sky looked distinctly greyer than it had two hours previously.

“Well, I hope you enjoyed yourselves,” said Smith bitterly. “Who knows what time we’re going to arrive in Thoen now.

“That is no problem,” replied Chuchat. “I know nice hotel one hour from here where we can stay the night.”

“What?” roared Smith, utterly dismayed. “But I thought it was your intention to get to Thoen tonight.”

“Tonight, tomorrow...it not make difference,” replied Chuchat philosophically. “Better to rest in hotel tonight.”

“Oh, ok, no problem,” returned Smith sarcastically. “You two stay here for two hours—for no good reason—and now we have to pay for a hotel for the night.” Smith seemed to be conveniently forgetting that he expected to stay in Thoen with Chuchat free of charge, and I felt inclined to remind him of the fact. Once again I thought better of it. Both being Chuchat’s guests, he was the only one who could reasonably utter a criticism.

We reached the small town a little after eight. The hotel that Chuchat had mentioned was already full and we settled on another on the main High Street. Chuchat and I took a look around, and then

found Smith's room to see how he was faring. He was stretched out on the bed, and seemed contented enough.

"This place is a good bargain," he declared, obviously delighted with the fact that the price for one night was around the five-dollar mark. We set out for Thoen early the next morning, and arrived just before lunch. I settled down in the guest room that had been promised me, while Smith sulkily accepted a smaller room next door. This didn't prevent him from informing Chuchat at dinner that night of his intention to stay in Thoen for about two weeks. This was more than I felt able to bear. I decided that it was time to take things into my own hands.

The following day, after a breakfast that was most memorable for Smith's complaints about his mattress, I declined Chuchat's invitation to join Smith and himself in a little tour of Thoen. I told Chuchat that I had some business to conduct on the Internet. As soon as I was sure they'd gone, I collected essential clothes and bathroom articles in a small bag, and strolled over to the hotel situated no more than a couple of hundred meters from Chuchat's house. There, I booked a room for an indefinite period. It was cheap and clean, and I was away from Smith at last. I phoned Chuchat after lunch.

"What has happened?" he asked anxiously. "I worry about you. Where are you now?"

"Listen, Chuchat," I began with determination, "I simply can't stand to watch Smith guzzling and drinking any longer. He's making me

crazy with all his complaining. Get rid of him, and I'll come back. If not, I'm staying here." Chuchat did all in his power to change my mind, but I remained adamant. He had to get rid of Smith before I would set foot in his house again. Finally, after making an oblique threat to withdraw my financial support, he acquiesced.

"Ok, I get rid of him. Give me a day. I call you this time tomorrow." I waited in vain for Chuchat's call the following day. I hardened my heart and determined to sit it out. After three days, Chuchat finally came across to see me in person. He seemed like a man at the end of his tether.

"I do everything I can to make him leave. First, I make big barbecue and buy him case of fourteen beers. I tell him that you and I have business to attend to and need some time alone, but Smith not say nothing. Today, I lose my temper and I shout and cry at him. I tell him that he is fat monster and must leave us alone, but he only smile and tell me that the two weeks will soon pass. In tears, I leave him and come to see you, my friend." I nodded grimly. The time had come to make an end to Smith. It was important that Chuchat suspect nothing until it was too late. Chuchat was altogether too Theravada for the job at hand.

"I will return with you now, Chuchat. I am Smith's countryman and I understand how he thinks. I am sure that I can persuade him to leave without any offense being taken." Chuchat blinked at me doubtfully.

"You can do this?" I assured Chuchat that all that was necessary was for Smith and me to have a

heart to heart talk. He would then get the message, and leave. Although he was still doubtful, Chuchat at last agreed to my plan and went to wait in the foyer while I got my things together. I packed my few belongings into the bag in the same order as when I'd come—with one exception. The Smith and Wesson handgun now lay on the top instead of the bottom. I was going to put a bullet in Smith's fat torso.

After settling my bill, Chuchat and I strolled slowly over to his place. I positively exulted at the thought of what was going to happen next. Smith wouldn't even have time to understand what had hit him. I could picture the lolling mouth flapping open in surprise, destined never to chew again. My anticipation was short-lived. We arrived at Chuchat's house to discover that Smith had already gone. Chuchat read me the note he'd left.

Chuchat,

I have been disgusted by the treatment I have received at your hands. I had thought you to be my friend, but now I realize that you only ever associated with me in the hope of getting some tangible reward.

In these circumstances, I have decided to unburden you of my presence. I admit myself to be deeply disappointed in your selfish attitude, and it is unlikely that you will ever see or hear from me again. I have hired a car to drive me to Cheng Mai, from where I'll take the plane to Phuket to spend the rest of my vacation.

Sincerely, John Smith.

“He gone,” declared Chuchat redundantly, after reading the letter.

“It would certainly seem so,” I replied happily, but cautiously. After all, I thought, he may still have a change of heart and appear once more, just when we least expected it. To my relief, the rest of the day passed without any further sign of him. I went to bed in high spirits that night, in the firm knowledge that Mr. John Smith had finally left for good.

The Best Laid Plans

The planet of Azuria in the Andromeda Galaxy had long since subjugated all intelligent forms of life within its own solar system to its martial will. Now, the war-like Azurians began to look beyond their own system, their own galaxy even, to find new life forms to conquer. They had long known of a beautiful blue planet in the adjoining galaxy, named Earth, where a race of beings called Men existed. Now, through the development of warped space-drive, they were finally in a position to conquer what they had long coveted.

The Azurians lived only for war. Their society was designed to foster a war-like spirit and a sense of their own martial destiny. An entire race of conquered people, called Zelots, served their every need, from the cradle to the grave. The peculiarly militaristic characteristics of the Azurians had developed when they had been forced to abandon their dying planet, Katron, and invade and colonize Azuria. The Zelots had been the original inhabitants of Azuria, but now they were merely the slaves of the Azurians (who'd even stolen their name). Since the conquest of Azuria

some thousand years before, the Azurians had subjugated more than five hundred planets in their solar system. Their method was to leave a military force and a governor in command of every conquered place. Earth was their next target.

"Is the invasion fleet ready to leave yet, Wutan?" enquired the Emperor, Zarok.

"Yes, Your Excellency, the army's commander in chief replied. All is prepared. More than a hundred warships, each carrying a thousand warriors, are waiting to depart. This will be more than enough to conquer Earth. I expect the puny Earthlings to be crushed and subjugated to our will in just a few days. I will be personally supervising the conquest."

"Good fortune and the blessings of our gods go with you, Wutan," intoned the Emperor of Azuria. "We shall be following your exploits on the All-Seeing Eye. The time has come to depart. Say your brief goodbyes and leave for Earth to perform the glorious task that lies ahead of you." Wutan saluted the Emperor, and left. Three hours later, his war fleet of a hundred ships was on its way to Earth.

The journey through warped space-time would take no more than three days. The ships would land at strategic points throughout America, known to be the most powerful military and political power on the planet. When the Americans capitulated, the rest of the Earthlings would quickly follow suit.

Three days passed swiftly enough, and the Azurian invasion fleet was soon examining its

destination through the viewfinder. Little did the weak Earthlings know, thought Wutan with relish, that the most terrible destruction in their short history lay only hours ahead. His ship would be the first to land, in Times Square itself. He tried to imagine the terror that would seize the Earthlings at the sight of his majestic warship landing in the very heart of Manhattan. A triumphant smile came to the conqueror's face. The joy of conquest was one he'd experienced many times, but never had he taken such a prize as this blue planet before. The remaining ships would wait in orbit for further orders from him. It was thought that the pathetic Earth people might surrender at the sight of Wutan's ship alone. If not, orders would be given for the invasion force to land at their designated points.

As Wutan's ship screamed through the Earth's atmosphere, the great conqueror caught his breath at the blue beauty of this liquid world. What a prize it would be! He would build a great palace here for himself and live at least half the year on this precious jewel of a planet. Retirement was not too far off, and then his stay might become permanent.

Slowly, the battleship descended. The continents and oceans became plain, and gradually the contours of North America grew larger and larger in the window of the viewfinder. Soon it was possible to discern individual cities on the ground below, and as the great warship continued to descend, the particular features of New York were revealed. Wutan saw nothing to surprise him. The

Azurians had observed Earth for many years prior to the invasion and they knew exactly what to expect. Finally, the great eagle of a ship made a gentle touchdown in the center of Times Square, the heart of Manhattan itself. Wutan smiled to himself, imagining the terror and confusion of the people outside. The monitor was switched on, but to the Azurians surprise, everyone appeared to be going about their business as usual.

“How dare these puny Earthlings ignore us! Open the doors!” screamed the conqueror Wutan. The great doors slid open, and the battle ramps descended. Wutan himself, surrounded by his personal guard, was the first to emerge from the ship. They marched boldly down the battle ramps, choring their great battle hymn: but what they saw sent them scurrying back like frightened children!

“Lift the battle ramps. Close the hatches!” screamed Wutan. “We must leave immediately.” The puzzled soldiers and engineers followed Wutan’s orders without question, and immediately sealed up the ship.

“Blast off! Blast off!” screamed Wutan, and the desperate tone of fear in his voice did not go unnoticed. Minutes later, the commander in chief’s battleship had rejoined the rest of the invading force patiently waiting outside the Earth’s orbit. New orders were relayed to the hundred waiting ships.

“The invasion of Earth has been abandoned. Plot an immediate course for our return to Azuria. We shall never again return to this accursed place,” said Wutan, with something akin to fear

still to be heard in the tremulous quality of his voice. The information naturally came as a shock to Wutan's second-in-command.

"Great Master of War, Wutan," he began hesitantly, "what was it in Times Square that has caused this... *panic?*"

"If you had uttered these words half an hour ago, Xon, son of Marias, I would have killed you where you stood," said Wutan, passing a sweaty hand over his perspiring face. "Instead, you will now hear what we saw as we left the ship in Times Square." He shuddered before continuing. "Thousands of giant insects clustered around our ship. Their sheer force of numbers threatened to overturn it. Of the Earthlings themselves, we could see no more than giant brown, black, and red mountains moving carelessly over us." Wutan shook his head in frustration at Xon's obvious confusion.

"Do you realize what I am saying, Xon? *The people of Earth. They were so huge, that we saw nothing of them but their shoes!*"

The Fate of Cydonia

There had been disagreement concerning the Cydonia region of Mars for fifty years. In 1976, when manned space travel was still in its early days, the Viking mission had taken some primitive photos of the planet which seemed to show a giant humanoid face about 176 feet long. To the west of this face lay a series of structures, either natural or man-made, which could be interpreted as the remains of an ancient Martian city. Enthusiasts were sure that the mathematical relationships that existed between the face and certain pyramidal structures in the ‘city’ could not be accidental. More conservative thinkers dismissed the ideas as woolly thinking, and asserted that the so-called ‘city’ and ‘face’ were no more than unusual geological formations. Subsequent unmanned flights to Mars had failed to settle the issue. It was sure that *something* was there, but exactly *what* was difficult to fathom. Now, in the year 2026, the issue would finally be resolved.

After a long and exhausting journey of several months, the space ship, *Intrepid*, was due to land in Cydonia in a matter of hours. If calculations

were correct, it would land right in the middle of the equilateral triangle formed by the face and the two five-sided pyramids on the outskirts of the 'city'. This would give the astronauts onboard an opportunity to explore the entire area in their mobile Mars Buggy.

The journey of *Intrepid* had not been easy for the crew, two American men, and a British woman. In spite of the many experiments that they needed to perform onboard, the long hours had played on their nerves. The male astronauts, Sam Zip and Howard Fracture, had found themselves competing for the attentions of the British woman, Helen Sawyer. Their personal issues had been intensified by the complete breakdown of radio contact with mission control due to unspecified technical problems. Now, the descent to Mars reignited the enthusiasm of the astronauts, and they watched from the observation chamber with excitement as their streamlined craft glided closer to the surface.

They were still many miles up and unable to make any definite assertions yet. However, the contours of the face-like structure, and also those of the nearby 'city' to the west, could already be seen. In just moments, they would finally learn the truth about these mysterious structures. Had they been deserted by an ancient and extinct humanoid race, or was the more popular and mundane explanation of an unusual combination of geological features correct?

The red Martian sands were visible now. At last, the crew was able to make out the individual

features of the structures on the Martian surface. The mystery had been resolved. Sam Zip was the first to break the silence.

“Unbelievable,” he whispered in awe. “It really is a city!” And it really was! The massive stone structures were now clearly visible to the solitary astronauts. The huge, androgynous face had obviously been chiseled from the sheer rock itself. The two pyramids, some kilometers to the west, were each at least a kilometer square, and the five-sided nature of the gigantic structures was now apparent. The other structures in the city were still undefined at this point in the descent, but the essential question dominating the past fifty years had finally been answered. At some point in the distant past, intelligent humanoid life had indeed existed on the surface of the Red Planet, Mars.

As *Intrepid* drew ever closer to the Martian surface, the sheer enormity of these humanoid creations almost overwhelmed the three humans in their pod-like space ship. They were entering into another world, one that had never succored them or held them close to its bosom. The giant face displayed a full set of grotesque teeth in a leering mouth. There was something disturbing about it. Suddenly, whatever ancient civilization had once lived there no longer seemed advanced and magnanimous, but sinister, and cruel.

The descent continued, and now the individual structures in the city ceased to be blurs. It was immediately apparent that the huge temple-like structures had been destroyed by time, or invasion, centuries before. The entire city was dull red in

color, a sure sign that everything had been carved out of the red Martian rock.

At last, *Intrepid* touched down. An eerie silence followed after the blasters had shut off. The three astronauts, pioneers of a new kind of exploration, were alone in a giant new world.

"Time to get going," said Sam Zip, breaking the silence. "Let's get the Mars Buggy operational and out of the hatch." The hatch ramp was lowered and the astronauts watched on the monitor as the sturdy vehicle, capable of traveling up to fifteen kilometers an hour, slid onto the Martian sands. The hatch door opened, and three humans in Mars survival suits stepped on to the cold and barren sands of Mars: the first in history to do so. It was midday, but the sun gave only a distant and pallid glow. For creatures used to the hospitable bosom of Mother Earth, it was a strange sensation indeed to be totally out of their natural environment, millions of kilometers from home.

They climbed into the buggy and set a course for the distant city of ruins. The face could wait until later. The essential point, that it had been formed and shaped by an intelligent life form, was now beyond doubt. It took about an hour to reach the ruined city. The architecture was monolithic, and reminiscent of Abu Simbel in Egypt. The astronauts felt the eloquent silence of past history surrounding them. It was clear that the city had been destroyed by some cataclysmic event. The signs of sudden death surrounded them. Humanoid bones were scattered everywhere in a variety of grotesque death poses. It reminded them of Pom-

peii on Earth, where the eruption of Etna had brought sudden and violent death to an entire community. The only difference was the absence of lava flows in these streets.

The vast structure of one of the pyramids that, with the face, formed the much talked about equilateral triangle, stood about two kilometers away. They decided to make it their next stop. The pyramid reached up into the Martian air, as large as a small mountain. The other pyramid lay to the south. Although visible, it was about fifteen kilometers away. Like the face, it could wait a little longer before offering up its secrets.

It took less than ten minutes for the buggy to reach the nearer of the two pyramids. As they approached, they were overwhelmed by the sheer size and elegance of a mountain that had been shaped into a mathematically perfect, five-sided pyramid. They were still more than half a kilometer away, but they could clearly discern a great black entrance, guarded on either side by gigantic carved lion figures. It was like Mycenae or ancient Egypt, and each of the astronauts was awed at the sight.

They hesitated for a moment after arriving at the huge black entrance, conscious of their own insignificance. It was Sam Zip who once again reminded them of their responsibilities.

“Okay, you guys, hang on. We’re going inside.” And he drove straight into the central blackness before them. The buggy automatically lit up, and they found themselves driving through a great chamber. In the center of the chamber was

a console on a huge, round table. Independent control panels were placed at individual places around the table, obviously controlled and operated from the central console. The humans walked across to the console and examined it closely. Sam flipped a few switches and suddenly it whirled into life, covering the great chamber with a red glow. Yellow lights appeared at each of the control panels.

“Looks like we might learn something about what happened here,” said Sam enthusiastically. He walked to the nearest place at the table and sat down, examining the controls in front of him for a moment. “Hey,” he called to his companions, “looks like each of these control boxes contains some kind of stored digital information. I’m pretty sure that by flipping this green switch, we can start the whole thing up. Sit down, we’ll do it together.” The other two sat next to Sam and put on their headphone devices obediently. “Okay...ready?” asked Sam. “I’m flipping the switch now!” The three humans immediately sank into a sleep-like state, and heard a narration in a language they understood, English. It was accompanied by a series of pictures in their minds.

“This is the story of the planet Exteron, and its people, who, in the fortieth millennium after Eustace, were invaded by marauders from a planet in the nearby Andromeda galaxy. The marauders had successfully developed warp speed space travel and were consequently able to reach Exteron in a comparatively short period of time. For fifty years, war raged between us and finally, as our chances for survival came to look bleak, we

devised a twin-pronged plan. At home, we would use all our weapons and resources in a single year, hoping that we could crush the invaders and make them give up their plans of conquest before we entirely exhausted our much-depleted resources. In conjunction, twenty of our space ships, carrying a total of two thousand men and women, would leave the planet Exteron, and make their home on the Blue Planet, third from the sun. It was known that conditions for human life on this planet were ideal, even better than those on Exteron itself. Thus, if our rear-guard action was to fail on Exteron, our species would continue its existence on a sister planet.

“The greatest difficulty in the realization of this plan was our certain knowledge that huge monsters roamed the great continent of the Blue Planet. Our technology would, however, be sufficient to control these primitive creatures. It simply meant that the presence of these beasts would make the Blue Planet a less than hospitable environment for our settlers. The twenty ships landed safely on the great continent and immediately set about building a city there. This much we know. How things will develop in the future will be forever unknown to us. The commander of the invaders has issued an ultimatum: ‘Capitulate, or see your beautiful planet utterly destroyed.’ We have decided that we would prefer to see Exteron completely annihilated than colonized by outside barbarians. We have replied defiantly, and fully expect our planet to be stripped bare of its life-giving atmosphere by our attackers, who have grown

tired of the long years of war and wish to return to their home planet in the Andromeda system. We shall continue to prosper on the Blue Planet, where even now our colonizers are building a great city. Thus it is in the Universe: Life generates death, and death generates life.

“Strangers. You have gained this information about the lost people of Exteron in your own language due to the universal translator, capable of analyzing the brain of any intelligent life form and changing raw information into understandable patterns. Peace be with you, and should you be visitors from the Blue Planet itself, we embrace you as brothers. Farewell!” And so it finished. The three astronauts had not only heard the transcript of the tragic end of Exteron, but had simultaneously experienced a live sequence of images. Now they were silent, their minds overwhelmed with the enormity of what they had heard and seen. Howard Fracture finally spoke.

“So...we’re all Martians?”

“But if they are us...and they built this great city on Earth...” said Helen thoughtfully, “why don’t we know anything about them?”

“I was wondering the same thing myself,” replied Sam Zip. “It seems that the colonization took place during the period of the dinosaurs on earth, which would also explain the reference to a *single* continent. This all happened prior to the division of the continents...” Howard Fracture interjected.

“But on Earth we have a whole archaeologically proven pre-history, going right back to the

Stone Age. How could these advanced people possibly be confused with Stone Age men?"

"Good point," returned Sam Zip thoughtfully, "but what if some catastrophic event destroyed the great city that those settlers built, and threw them back to a primitive level of society?"

"You mean the people from Exteron might somehow have changed into our own Cave Men?" asked Helen incredulously. "That seems impossible...how could it ever happen?"

"You must be aware of the scientific explanation usually given for the disappearance of the dinosaurs," responded Sam thoughtfully.

"You mean that story about a giant meteor hitting the Yucatan peninsula in present day Mexico?" said Helen.

"Right. Most of the impact crater is now under the Atlantic Ocean, but the majority of scientists accept that it was this disaster that caused the worldwide catastrophes that made the dinosaurs extinct. What if the same impact destroyed the advanced civilization from Exteron, and reduced the few survivors to a primitive level? It's one explanation."

"Sure," agreed Howard Fracture, "and the pyramids and the sphinx in Egypt might be some kind of throwback, genetic recall, of how things looked up here. It's giving me the creeps just thinking about it!" Helen was nodding her head thoughtfully.

"It would also explain those humanoid bones found ten years ago in Florida. They were around sixty-five million years old. They were dismissed

as being some kind of fake at the time, but perhaps they were real after all.” The three astronauts stood in an awed silence, alone in their own thoughts for some moments. Finally, Sam Zip spoke.

“Let’s get back to the ship. After the discoveries we’ve made here, we should return to Earth immediately. Other missions can discover more. It’s our duty to make sure that this amazing information isn’t lost.”

A few moments later, the three astronauts were on their way back to *Intrepid*. They were less than half a mile from their ship when they had their first misgivings. The ship seemed to be only half the size it should be, and the bottom half was covered by a molten liquid mass.

“What the hell is that?” screamed Howard Fracture. “The ship is being destroyed.” Within five minutes the astronauts were back at the landing sight, and the hideous truth became apparent. Their ship was being greedily consumed by millions of silver-colored, ant-like creatures. The hull of *Intrepid* had been constructed using the hardest metals known to man, but it was like butter to the jaws of these super-termites!

“We’re too late,” lamented Helen Sawyer. “Even if we could stop them, which we can’t, they’ve already consumed at least half of the ship.”

“I’m afraid you’re right, Helen,” said Sam, turning the buggy around and heading back to the ruined city. “Those monsters will make short work of us as well, once they finish off the ship. The

only hope we have to avoid that grisly end is to get as far away from here as possible, and pray that we don't bump into those little monsters anywhere else."

"But...we need the ship to get back to Earth," intoned Howard Fracture slowly. He was having a hard time coming to terms with the unpalatable truth. And the truth was that the only freedom left to them was the freedom to choose the precise manner of their death. Helen gave Howard a look of compassion.

"Don't you get it, big boy?" said Helen. "We're all dead meat. We can't get back to Earth, and our suits can't maintain life for more than another ten hours." Howard Fracture's helmeted head sank slowly into his hands as he let out a terrible groan.

"What an awful fate, to die on this barren hunk of rock, alone." Suddenly, Sam Zip pointed ahead.

"It may be all over quicker than we think, Howard," said Sam Zip in a monotone, pointing ahead. Millions and millions of the super-termites, apparently coming from the ruined city, were heading straight for the astronauts. Sam stopped the buggy and turned to the other two.

"What's it going to be? Death by super-termite, asphyxiation, or ray blast?"

"I'm not waiting for those things to get here!" shouted Howard Fracture, and ripped off his head covering in a frenzy. He immediately pitched forward onto the Martian sands and began clutching desperately at his throat. Sam and Helen watched

him expire, horribly, before them. When it was over, Sam turned to Helen.

"It's a horrible way to die, but maybe it's better than waiting for those termites to arrive," he suggested, still unconvinced.

"But Sam... Where did these creatures come from? The story we heard. It never mentioned them," she said desperately. "What did we miss?" Sam Zip laughed harshly.

"I can guess," he replied wretchedly. "The narrator in the pyramid told us that the invaders from Andromeda were going to make the planet uninhabitable. This was a perfect way to do it. These little monsters must have eaten all life on the surface, including plant life, thus making it impossible for humans to exist here. I don't know why they didn't finish off the city too. Maybe they don't like rock."

"Sam...what are we going to do?" Helen asked quietly. He took Helen's hand affectionately in his own.

"Might as well just wait here, Helen." He smiled grimly. "At least we've come home to die!"

The Heart of Infinity

She came to see me just three days ago, and I still can't quite believe it. What was her name again? Diane, or Diana? It must have been Diana, goddess of the moon and hunting. I have to take care not to confuse our recent meeting with our previous lives, where she'd poisoned me with toxic wine after we'd made love in a stately Italian chamber full of portraits, Madonnas, and mythological reconstructions. I remember the sneer on her lips as my life had ebbed away.

This Thursday had been more mundane. She'd come to see me because she was frightened. There was a man who'd been following her for three days. Who was he, and what did he want? In return for quite a handsome remuneration, I'd agreed to help her. I'd still been able to look at her quite dispassionately at that stage. She was touching forty, but still beautiful, with long blonde hair and eyes of blue. Closer inspection revealed a profound sorrow etched deeply into the lines of her face. I remember our conversation vividly.

"What exactly do you want me to do, Miss Hellias? I can easily intercept this guy, but will

that be the end of the matter? Do you have any idea why he's following you?" She shook her head impatiently.

"No, I don't. That's why I need you, Mr. Del Vecchio. Follow him back to his organization, and find out who's employing him. I'm sure I don't need to tell you how to do your job," she said, although her tone implied that she felt otherwise.

"Sure, I can do that, Miss Hellias. But has it occurred to you that this might just be an old flame of yours acting alone? There isn't necessarily an organization in the background."

"Mr. Del Vecchio, I have seen this man several times in the last seventy-two hours. I can assure you that I have never laid eyes on him before."

"Might be a plastic surgery job," I conjectured, unconvincingly. "Anyway, let's assume you're right, and there's some evil organization backing this man. What's your business, that these people should be so interested in you, Miss Hellias?" She hesitated for a moment, but her reply was firm and strong.

"I am a professional medium, Mr. Del Vecchio. I put people into contact with their dear departed ones." I had been half expecting something unusual, but this was quite a revelation.

"You're a medium?" I repeated stupidly.

"Yes," replied the woman calmly. I am a *professional* medium, Mr. Del Vecchio." I smiled grimly.

"My dear Miss Hellias, if you're a medium, why waste your money, and my time? Just per-

form some 'abracadabra' and find out who this guy belongs to for yourself." She shook her head decidedly.

"I'm afraid it doesn't work like that, Mr. Del Vecchio. My small gift merely allows others who have passed to the other side to use me as a means of communication to contact their loved ones."

"Do you contact them, or do they contact you?" I asked the question indifferently, but I felt sure that the answer would provide me with some useful information concerning Miss Diana Hellias.

"It depends," she replied evasively.

"On what?" I persisted.

"On where I am, and who I'm speaking with. Sometimes the spirits are eager to make contact with those they've left behind. On other occasions, it is the living relative that supplies the spur. You doubt me, Mr. Del Vecchio. Let me tell you some things about yourself."

"Go right ahead," I said with a sarcastic smile.

"You are a lonely and solitary man, Mr. Del Vecchio. Your parents are dead, and your young wife died in tragic circumstances more than ten years ago. It is she who tells me this. She is in the room right now. She wants me to tell you that it wasn't your fault...it was the world that frightened her...she was tired." I wasn't smiling now.

"Who the hell are you, and what do you want? Why have you gone to the trouble of researching my life and enacting this little drama?" I said angrily. She shook her head sadly.

“Mr. Del Vecchio, I got your name from the New York phone book. When I came into this room, I knew nothing about your life.” I stared into the woman’s blue eyes with hostile uncertainty. My wife had indeed died ten years previously. She’d committed suicide while I’d been pursuing a case with the N.Y.P.D. Diana Hellias returned my gaze with growing recognition in her beautiful blue eyes.

“Mr. Del Vecchio, I begin to realize that it is not chance alone that has led me here. There is something that we share in common.”

“And what may that be, Miss Hellias—our local library?”

“I was your lover in a previous life. Your dead wife was my sister at the time. She recognizes me, you see.”

“She’s insane,” I thought, but I needed the bucks, so I smiled like a Cheshire cat.

“Of course, Miss Hellias. After all, it’s well known that all our lives are linked together, and we meet the same people over and over again. Now, let’s get back to this man who’s been following you...”

The passage of two days and a lot of dollars courtesy of Miss Hellias, found me in the foyer of the Empire State Building, gazing unseeingly at a rather poor painting of the pyramids. Miss Hellias’s shadow was beginning to interest me. She’d been right about him belonging to an organization. He was a member of the Zampini family: Mafia, through and through. Why the hell should the Italian Mafia be interested in a small-time fraudster

like Diana Hellias? The possible answers intrigued me.

The guy's name was Vecchioni. He fronted an import and export business that supposedly concerned itself with Italian wines, but actually smuggled opium from Afghanistan into the States (via Sicily), where it was quickly transformed into pure heroin. It hadn't been difficult to get this information. The cops knew all about Vecchioni, but he was too smart to let them pin anything on him. Which also led to the question of why a smart and important guy like Vecchioni would be following Diana Hellias around personally. Why didn't he get one of his paid stooges to do it? At present, he was on the twenty-first floor of the Empire State Building with his company's accountant, ostensibly involved in financial decisions concerning his wine importing business. "Probably cooking the books," I thought. I'd gone up in the same elevator as Vecchioni, and watched him enter an establishment called 'Duggan and Smith Chartered Accountants.' I'd been waiting for him in the foyer for close on an hour now. Suddenly, I felt the muzzle of a gun pushed into my back.

"Make a noise and you're a dead man," came a brutal whisper. "Now, walk slowly over to the elevator and get out on the twenty-first floor." It was clear that Vecchioni was on to me, but under the circumstances there really wasn't anything I could do. I followed instructions, with my escort close behind. No one else got in, and there was no one around when we got out on the twenty-first

floor, either. It didn't surprise me to learn that we were heading for the offices of Duggan and Smith.

"Inside. Quick!" came the brutal tone again, and I had no choice but to comply.

Once inside the office, I was able to get a better look at the man. He was big and burly, and hadn't shaven for a couple of days at least. He motioned to an inner door.

"In there," he said curtly. I opened the door and passed inside. Vecchioni was waiting for me, with an expensive Havana cigar in his hand.

"Mr. Del Vecchio, I believe? You see that this is not a game for amateurs," he said with a mirthless smile.

"How did you get on to me?" I asked, genuinely puzzled.

"Do not concern yourself with futile questions, Mr. Del Vecchio. It is part of my job to deal with any potential danger. With your snooping you have become such. And now you must take the consequences." Vecchioni nodded to the man behind me, and a heavy object crashed against the back of my skull with incredible force. A galaxy of stars exploded before my eyes and I felt myself falling through space and time.

"I need you too much, Alfredo," came a much-loved voice. "How could I ever live without you?"

"I curse the day that I fell under your bewitching spell," a strident tone answered, which I recognized with amazement to be my own.

"There is still hope, Alfredo," she replied casually.

"No. There is none. Luigi is aware of our liaison, and he is determined to take his revenge on us both."

"No, Alfredo. You misunderstand. There is still hope. For me, at least. The wine you have drunk contained a lethal poison. You are dying, even as we speak. Luigi still loves me, and is inclined to believe that you led me astray. I will tell him that we realized the folly of our ways, and in one last act of remorse and compassion, you killed yourself that I might be free. Luigi has a generous spirit. He will forgive me. He may even find it in his heart to forgive you too, Alfredo."

"You evil enchantress," I heard myself yell. "Cursed be the day that we met. I am dying. Whatever Luigi's attitude may be, I assure you that I shall never forgive you, either in this world, or the next..."

"Goodbye, Alfredo."

I woke up with the distinct impression that my head had been split in two by a bulldozer.

"Hello, Mr. Del Vecchio. Welcome back to the land of the living." It was a female voice that seemed oddly familiar. As my head cleared, I recognized it to be that of Diana Hellias. She was pointing a Smith and Wesson at my heart. It seemed that we were in some inner office, and I surmised that we were still on Duggan and Smith's premises. In spite of the pain in my head, things were beginning to look clearer. I rubbed my

eyes and focused my gaze rather dizzily on the form of the woman in front of me.

“Congratulations, Miss Hellias. That was a neat trick you played on me. You were never really being followed at all, were you?” She shrugged her shoulders.

“Due to my importance in his organization, my friend, Pietro Vecchioni, agreed to help me in this venture. My rich clients speak loudly for me.” I nodded in comprehension.

“Of course. You begin with some mumbo-jumbo slight of hand, and then you get them hooked on dope, opium, let’s say. It must sharpen their perception of the spirit realm vastly,” I said sarcastically. Diane Hellias smiled grimly.

“I see you are most perceptive, Mr. Del Vecchio. However, you underestimate my genuine gifts. I really do have rather ‘special abilities,’ let us say.” I was inclined to sneer in response, but there was something in my deep unconscious that recognized the truth of what she said.

“Who are you exactly, Miss Hellias, and what do you want from me?” She paused, deep in thought, before answering in a serious tone.

“Mr. Del Vecchio, you and I were lovers in a previous life. I told you as much when we met the other day. At the time of our being lovers, I was the wife of the Duke of Padua, and you were a captain in his army. Our liaison was discovered, and rather than risk the wrath of my husband, I poisoned you, and made it look like suicide. He was merciful to me.” She hesitated for a moment. “The problem is that ever since then, my bad

karma has led me to be born into a series of desperate situations, each one more horrendous than the last. I am very tired, and wish to escape this terrible cycle. And I can only achieve this by making reparation to you." A clammy trickle of sweat ran down the back of my neck.

"And how exactly are you planning to do that?" I asked. Miss Hellias threw the gun across to me.

"You must take your revenge and kill me, Alfredo. After that, I will be free." I picked up the gun.

"And what about me? How long will I get inside for killing you?"

"Don't worry about that, Alfredo. I've told Pietro Vecchioni that I am in love with you, and that it is my intention to confess all to you today. I persuaded him that I could convince you to stay silent and come away with me. The truth is that Pietro Vecchioni doesn't intend to allow either of us to leave this office alive. But now you have the gun. Kill me, and then shoot your way out of the office. You'll have had your revenge, and I will be free." I shook my head decidedly.

"Not a chance, Miss Hellias. I'm not letting you off the hook that easily. Sure, I'll shoot my way out of the office, but you're coming with me."

Suddenly the office door burst open and there stood Pietro Vecchioni, pistol in hand. I tried to swivel round and get a shot in, but he had me at a disadvantage, and fired his gun abruptly. Diana had anticipated his move and had thrown herself

in front of me as the door burst open. The bullet intended for me hit her somewhere in the chest. My own gun spat twice, and Vecchioni collapsed in the doorway with a bullet through the brain. Another man rushed into the room, only to stumble over the body of his fallen boss. My pistol spoke again, and he joined Vecchioni, spread-eagled on the floor. Then all was quiet. It seemed that there had been just the two of them.

Diana Hellias was quite dead. I rose and walked slowly into the outer offices. I'd been correct. It seemed that Duggan and Smith was no more than a front for activities of a more nefarious nature. I could see no evidence of any accounting business. Rather, it seemed like office space for group meetings. Perhaps it was sometimes used as an emergency hideout, too. I took the elevator to the ground floor and walked out into the mild New York afternoon. With luck, no one would connect me with the three bodies. If some nosy-parker had seen me, and the cops were able to put two and two together in order to trace me, I'd simply tell them the truth (naturally omitting all references to the supernatural). My only crime was to leave that messy business behind without informing anyone. I somehow felt that it was a personal affair. No one else was directly involved. I'd done the police a favor by putting bullets in Vecchioni and his colleagues, and they'd probably put the deaths down to some kind of Mafia reprisal attack, anyway. No tears would be shed.

For my part, I have to get used to knowing what it's like to look into the heart of infinity. I

The Black Scarab of Amun-Ra

also still need to assess my feelings about Diana Hellias's final, desperate act. All in all, I guess she's paid her dues.

The Interplanetary Trial Chamber

“The court has now heard arguments from both the prosecution and the defense, and the time has come to pass sentence on the warlord, Krall. It is well known throughout the galaxy that Krall and his armies from the inner planets of Xerxos spread terror and mayhem throughout the planets of the Protectorate for twenty years. It is impossible to estimate with exactitude the number of lives that were needlessly lost during this reign of terror. However, the figure is undoubtedly in the millions. Similarly, damage caused to the economies of the planets involved runs into millions of galactons.

“The seriousness of these crimes cannot be over-estimated. We must, nevertheless, consider any mitigating factors in Krall’s favor before passing sentence. The defense team has suggested several. In the accused’s apparent favor is a doctor’s report asserting that he has lost his senses and is, in short, a lunatic. It is also stated that he is suffering from a rare form of incurable blood cancer. Lastly, there is his extreme age to consider.

“We’ll begin with an examination of the seriousness of Krall’s crimes. As a young officer in the Protectorate, Krall formed a rebel army, recruited mostly from his home planet of Koss, but also from other planets. Within a few years, Krall had taken control of his home solar system, expelling the Protectorate from every planet within its boundary. Within another six months, the warlord had invaded several neighboring solar systems and reduced them to subservience beneath the slogan ‘Freedom from the Protectorate.’ It is well documented that the forces of Krall rarely took prisoners, preferring to murder defeated armies in their entirety. These are terrible crimes indeed. Added to Krall’s original insurrection, it puts on this court a great responsibility to ensure that the penalty for the accused reflects the seriousness of the crimes involved.

“Additionally, it is well known that the armies of the accused routinely used torture and ethnic cleansing against those people unfortunate enough to fall under the yoke of Krall’s hegemony. Entire planets were sometimes stripped of their populations by means of exile or murder. It is only now, a full twenty years since the reassertion of the Protectorate’s power, that some semblance of normality is finally returning to the victims of Krall’s mad search for personal aggrandizement. It is not an exaggeration to say that the name Krall is synonymous for evil in the minds of people all over the galaxy. It also weighs heavily against the accused that he did not willingly give himself up to face trial. Rather, he eluded the inevitable justice

of the Protectorate for more than thirty years before he was finally captured.

“With regard to the mitigating circumstances, three factors need to be examined. First, there is the medically attested lunacy of the accused. It is accepted that a madman cannot be held responsible for his actions. However, the pertinent question is: Was the accused insane at the time of his crimes? It is clear from the evidence presented that the accused was not insane at the time of his crimes. In consequence, I find this consideration invalid, and thus impermissible as a mitigating circumstance.

“Second, the accused’s defense team has suggested that Krall is dying from a rare form of cancer and cannot expect to live for more than another year or two. Our experts have closely examined the reports provided by an independent medical examination team. Although the findings were occasionally contradictory, they found no clear evidence that the accused is in fact suffering from an incurable disease. The issue is further complicated by the fact that the inhabitants of Koss possess an unexplained ability to change their body’s molecular and cellular structures at will. On balance of probability, we thus find that the health of the accused cannot be used as a mitigating circumstance.

“Finally, we must consider the argument that Krall’s extreme age be accepted as a mitigating circumstance. At present, the accused is seventy-two years old. The average life span for a Kossian is one hundred and forty. In other words, the ac-

cused, though advanced in years for some races in the galaxy, is no more than a middle-aged man as an inhabitant of the planet Koss. Consequently, his age can be dismissed as a mitigating circumstance.

“To summarize: The crimes of the accused involve murder, slavery, and the exile and extermination of whole communities throughout the length and breadth of the galaxy. They are grave indeed. Furthermore, the accused has put forward a plea of ‘not guilty,’ and at no time during this trial has he expressed regret or remorse for any of his actions. He did not surrender, but had to be dragged to justice like a dog, after more than thirty years on the run. It has been clearly demonstrated that the considerations put forward by the accused’s defense team cannot be admitted as mitigation. In consequence, it is the decision of this trial chamber that the accused receive the severest penalty within its power to impose. The accused, Krall, will now rise to hear his sentence.

“The court finds the accused, Krall, guilty on all counts. The sentence of this trial chamber is that the accused be taken to the Protectorate’s headquarters on their home planet, Earth, where he will be hung, drawn, and quartered, according to an ancient practice, which occasionally still has its uses in the present. Thereafter, his flesh will be hacked from his bones and pieces of his body will be dispatched to all corners of the galaxy. On arrival, they will be prominently displayed in a public place as a warning to future, would-be traitors. This trial is now closed.”

The Last Time

Do you know that old Rolling Stones song? ‘This could be the last time...I don’t know...’ It just plays through my head a lot, especially recently. Maybe I’m just getting old: awareness of my own mortality and all that. I have a big job tonight and for some reason, I’m feeling nervous.

It didn’t used to be like this. There was the time when I had to zap John F. Kennedy himself. Did I get hot under the collar then? Not me! They blamed it on that idiot, Lee Harvey Oswald, just as I’d planned. No one ever had a clue about who killed the president, and no conspiracy theorist ever got close to the real reason for his death. Castro and Khrushchev planned it as their revenge for the Cuban missile crisis. The Ruskies had lost face through their humiliating climb-down, and Castro was just red-hot for revenge. When they agreed that the job was to be done, they immediately contacted me. Naturally. They knew that I was the best-paid assassin in America. The world, in fact. I flew to Havana and collected a fat packet of dollars from old man Fidel himself. Khrushchev had given him the money. Everything went perfectly.

No one ever had a clue about that job, and Oswald had been the perfect fall guy.

But that was another time and place. Maybe even another man. What happens to old killers? Do they fade away, like soldiers? I guess old killers just get killed. That's why I'm nervous. Nobody hires me for the big jobs anymore. Hand shakes a bit. Well, a lot, actually. But that's neither here nor there. I still don't miss. Not often, anyway. I'm still working, and don't have any complaints. I've got to kill a rich businessman tonight. I can't tell you his name, but if I did, you'd know it. Makes computer software, and no, it's not Bill Gates. I have to complete the job three hours from now, but what am I doing? Drinking whiskey in a two-bit hotel in Manhattan.

I've always spent or lost most of the money I've made. The last time was already a year ago. Collected a cool quarter million dollars then, but I had some bad luck. Combination of women and gambling. I won't tell you all the gory details, they'd only bore you. Just take it from me that I'm broke. This time it's only a hundred grand, but right now, that's big money to me.

You know, six months ago, I fell in love with a woman, head over heels. Never happened to me before. Oh sure, I knew lots of women; I even thought that I was in love with some of them. I wasn't. It was just a physical thing: lonely people searching for some kind of mutual assurance. It never worked, just made me feel even more isolated.

But why am I telling you all this? What do you care, right? It's dog eat dog in this world, and if you're a cat, watch out! Actually, I prefer to think of myself as a shark. It's a nobler comparison. Anyway, dog or shark, this one's running low on energy.

It's about time I went along and cased the place. Of course I've already cased it a few times, but I need to check if anything crucial has changed now that the time of execution's arrived. That's what I call jobs...executions. I perform a service: I execute unwanted people. Is that too much realism for you? Anyway, that's the way I see things. You probably don't agree. You like your cozy nine-to-five job too much. And that little box you call your house, which they'll sell to some other sap when you die. Then your nagging wife will marry someone else, and your yelping, ungrateful kids will have another loser to take to the cleaners for all he's got. That's my point of view, anyhow. I guess it's a question of perspective. I was married once. It didn't work out. She didn't like the hours I worked. I suppose I even have a few brats scattered around here and there. Hope they turned out okay, and don't have anyone who loves them enough to hire someone like me to bump them off.

I know you think I'm cynical. But if you look at life clearly, isn't cynicism the best option? I'm never disappointed, unless I do my job badly. A professional should take pride in his work. Forget the rest. Forget money. It won't help you. The richest man in the world just gets bored, because he doesn't need to do anything. Believe me, you

can't take it with you...and I'm an expert. One squeeze of a trigger, and it's bye-bye Mr. Billionaire. Winner takes all. For a while, that is. Because the winner keeps changing, and the more you win, the more you have to lose.

Seven-thirty. I wish I had another bottle of whiskey. Might help to stop this shaking...probably make it worse. If someone didn't know me, they'd think I was finished. Tell that to J.F.K. Tell it to Lee Harvey Oswald. Tell it to Fidel and the Ruskies!

I've been thinking about suicide for some time now. Be like a Roman and take my own life, before I wind up a wreck of my former self. There's something noble in the idea of the executioner making himself his last job. I can't last much longer at this rate, and maybe it would be better to die from a friendly bullet, though that's a ridiculous concept. A bullet is just cold and unthinking steel. Still, the idea itself may be sound enough. Better to do the job myself than leave it to a stranger, an amateur.

It gave me a real kick to see J.F.K. die. You understand that I've always been a Republican? Ronald Reagan: now that was a *real* man. But I'd still have killed him if someone had paid me enough to do it. Nothing personal. The nut that was crazy about Jodie Foster nearly did it too. I'd gladly bump him off for nothing.

I'm going to leave the hotel money on the sideboard. Pity about this last job not getting done.

The Truth about Venus

It was a historic moment. The Venus probe was just about to burst through the stifling upper atmosphere and begin taking photos of the Venusian surface, photos that would be beamed back to Earth for instantaneous processing. It was well known that Venus, Earth's sister planet, suffered from a super 'greenhouse effect.' Despite being almost the same size as Earth, and having a position in the solar system that should have made life possible in teeming tropical jungles, it was even hotter than Mercury, the closest planet to the sun.

Speculation about the surface of Venus had tended toward the opinion that it was probably the nearest thing to the medieval view of Hell that anyone would ever find in the solar system. And now we were going to find out. Just five minutes more, and the first definitive pictures of the Venusian surface would appear. Everyone was at a fever pitch of excitement.

"What's your betting, Hal?" asked my colleague, Allan Smith.

"I'm not sure," I replied. "The safe bet is that it's going to be hot, but I'm not sure that we're

fully prepared to witness just how inhospitable the surface of that planet really is.”

“Only two minutes and counting. Let’s hope the heat shield doesn’t melt.” There was silence for the last minute with everyone lost in their own imaginings. Only the unthinking mathematical processes continued with exactitude amongst the fluctuating human tension. Finally, we were counting down the last ten seconds:

“...five...four...three...two...one...zero.”

Suddenly the great screen lit up, and for the first time in history, the surface of Venus was being viewed. Great volcanoes spat their lava into the molten air, and lava flows hundreds of miles long snaked their way across the scorched and lifeless land. Flames licked into every nook and cranny, and natural processes of spontaneous combustion lit up the deep crimson sky. Electrical storms crashed violently against the red, sullen horizon. It was as bad, even worse, than we’d expected.

“It’s exactly like hell,” said Alan eventually. Which was precisely what we’d all been thinking. Venus displayed a nightmare landscape. It was a combination of Dante and Dali: fearsome, yet somehow representative of some deep, hidden force within our own psyche.

The spaceship, *Adonis*, continued its flight toward the surface. Soon it would actually land on the diabolical planet. All of us at the NASA Control Center, Houston, were thinking the same thing: Thank God that no men were on board that vessel. As the small craft fired its blasters and began its final descent to the surface, the camera

caught something that profoundly shocked the watching scientists. It seemed to be the ruins of a great skyscraper. Flames burned all around it, and yet there was no doubt that this ruined shell had been a building constructed for the shelter of humanoid creatures not so different from ourselves.

"This is crazy," declared Alan at last. "How can there be a skyscraper in that inferno straight out of the pages of Dante?" I hoped that the answer I could think of was wrong, because its conclusion frightened me to death. Something else suddenly came into the view. It stood near the skyscraper and was the remains of what must have been, in the distant past, a gigantic statue. We could only see a general shape, but the figure was clearly humanoid in form. Just at that point, a great flash of red light appeared on the screen, followed by complete blackness. In spite of its heat shield, the Venus probe had been destroyed by the extreme temperatures on the surface of the planet. The recorded pictures were our sole proof that we hadn't been afflicted by a kind of collective hypnosis.

"What does it mean?" Smith enquired in a small boy's voice. I turned to him soberly. My thoughts were still an incomplete hypothesis, but I felt compelled to share them with him.

"It's a warning, Smith, don't you see? Given its position in the solar system, which is a lot better than our own, really, Venus should be teeming with life. And it was once, all forms of life. That was before humanoid creatures, not so different from ourselves, created the dreadful greenhouse

effect, which now traps heat in the Venusian atmosphere. It was hybris that destroyed the Venusian people.”

“Hybris?” queried Smith blankly. I nodded patiently.

“The Venusians overestimated their importance on the planet and ignored the needs of their ecosystem. They made a terrible mistake. It eventually led to their extinction.” Smith was out of his depth, (he’d never possessed much imagination), and he begged me to reveal more of my speculations. “Who can say precisely what happened?” I said. “Perhaps it was a nuclear war that destroyed the ozone layer, or something as simple as the use of Cs gasses, which once threatened Earth as well. At any rate, I believe that it was a humanoid race that created the infernal heat that made their planet uninhabitable. I believe it’s a warning,” I repeated. “These pictures have been preserved to sober our minds, and help us not to repeat the terrible mistakes made by our cousins on Venus.”

“You don’t really believe that?” asked Smith. “I’d prefer to think that those images were something other than what we thought they were. The mind easily plays tricks on tired men. Perhaps it was something similar to making out shapes in large cloudbanks?” he added hopefully.

“This was no trick,” I replied soberly. “We should release the pictures. Let the world see what hatred and enmity can result in. Perhaps this is our opportunity to avoid the terrible fate of the Venusians. We’d be fools to ignore it.”

The Vengeance of Meteron

Demetrius was a strong and healthy demigod whose mother, Psyche, doted on him. In spite of his early indifference toward the birth of a man-god, his grandfather, Solaris, King of all the gods, eventually came to love Demetrius as well. The first man-god to be born had been Zakron, the Devil. Solaris had long since dismissed him as a thoroughly bad lot, although the latter's plans for the annihilation of mankind had been given his tacit approval. Now, Demetrius had made him think twice. Perhaps there was hope for humankind after all. The Devil had been a perversion, an abomination, but Demetrius was everything that Zakron was not: beautiful, noble, considerate, funny, loyal, the list was endless. The only qualities that the two demigods shared were courage, and stubborn determination.

When Demetrius reached the age of eighteen, Solaris decided that it was time to have a heart-to-heart talk with Psyche about the young demigod's future. One afternoon, after his yearly regeneration, the king of the gods summoned Psyche into his presence.

“Psyche, I have brought you to my Sun Palace in order to discuss the future of your son, Demetrius. What do you believe his future path should be?” Psyche hesitated for a moment, unsure whether or not to unburden her soul to Solaris, whom she’d initially thought would only hate Demetrius. But she was aware that her father had since come to love the man-god, and so determined to speak only the truth.

“Solaris, I believe that Demetrius should be given the great mission of destroying that monstrosity, Zakron, and saving the human race from extinction. I tell you honestly, that it was for this reason that his father, Meteron, came to my bed. Now the gallant Meteron is dead, but his son, Demetrius, can still mate with the last remaining maiden on Earth. I refer to the beautiful Zelda, whom you yourself froze in a glacier on the peaks of Mount Glendor many eons ago, that she might never be contaminated by human copulation. Zakron’s mother can create a new superhuman race by yoking with my son, Demetrius. A new race of creatures, three parts man but one part god, will be created. They will be far superior to the human race of old, but in no way capable of threatening your own power, Solaris.”

Solaris had seemed lost in thought during Psyche’s long speech.

“Are all other humans dead, then?”

“Yes, Solaris. As a species, they died out just a few years after Meteron’s death, a direct consequence of Zakron’s evil planning. Now, let Demetrius fulfill his destiny by destroying Zakron,

and creating a new and better race of humans.” Solaris leaned down from his throne and took Psyche’s hands in his own.

“Psyche, you have a beautiful soul, and have always loved those ungrateful humans. You realize though, that Zelda was always one of my special loves. I still mark her birthday with a universal holiday. How can I bear the pain of seeing her return to life to join in sexual union with another? It was to prevent this that I set her inside the blue crystal on Mount Glendor for eternity. Are you asking me to now release her for the enjoyment of another?” Psyche bowed her head in submission before Solaris.

“Father, you are Master of all. If you wish to keep Zelda for your own, who shall stop you? But first, let her and Demetrius create a new breed that will make the Universe more secure for us all. These new humans, with a spark of the divine inside them, will be our personal foot soldiers. They will guard our eternal order from external disruption or revolt, and grant us more time for important things, like meditation and cosmic regeneration. Furthermore, the monster Zakron will be destroyed, and we are all aware of the dangerous hatred and envy that he holds for the gods in general, and you, Sire, in particular.” Solaris smiled in spite of himself.

“Does that abomination of nature hate me so much then, Psyche? I am, after all, his father.” Psyche nodded.

“Yes, Solaris. Zakron hates you for being so much greater than him. If it were possible, he

would replace you as king of the universe.” His smile faded.

“Do you believe that this is an attainable goal for Zakron to hold, Psyche?” asked Solaris.

“Who can tell, Father? He is tricky and disloyal, and has the support of various malcontents. Some of them, it is said, are among the gods themselves. Why leave fate to chance? Let Demetrius kill the Devil, and we will all rest easier. In addition, a new race of particularly able humans will be created to support us through future time. Is all this not to be greatly desired, Father?” Solaris reclined in his golden throne and pondered for a moment before responding.

“You have convinced me, daughter. Go and explain to Demetrius the nature of his perilous mission. It will be safer if he kills Zakron first. Then, he can release Zelda from the blue glacier. But be warned, the peak of the mountain is protected by many traps that not even I can nullify. I created them in case one of my brothers might attempt tasting Zelda’s sweet fruits against my wishes. The defenses are thus sufficient protection against the gods themselves. Go now daughter, and tell Demetrius of this news.” Psyche kissed Solaris’s feet and left the Sun Palace. She felt well pleased with her work.

She found Demetrius practicing archery in her palace gymnasium. At the sight of the tensed, steel-like muscles of Demetrius’s arms, she felt a ripple of motherly pride (was it something more, she often asked herself?) that she always had when viewing her son’s naked perfection. Demetrius let

fly his shaft and split the apple poised on a stand at the other end of the gymnasium. It was well known that he never missed.

“My son,” commenced Psyche, “there are important matters of which we must speak. Accompany me to the Solarium.” Obediently, Demetrius ceased his activity and followed his mother to the palace’s great central Solarium. This was where Psyche and Demetrius regenerated themselves daily with the energy of Solaris himself. Now, they reclined on the colorful heat divan, side-by-side, and bathed in the rejuvenating yellow rays that spread softly from the room’s domed vault.

“Demetrius, my son, our father, Solaris, has agreed to allow you to complete the mission for which you were born. You must kill Zakron, and avenge your father, Meteron. Solaris has consented to then allow you to climb Mount Glendor and free Zelda from the glacier of blue ice. The two of you shall form a union, from which a new and better human race shall be born. Demetrius nodded his head soberly and deliberately.

“Our father, Solaris, is indeed just and wise. Zakron’s days are numbered. After my father’s death has been avenged, I shall climb Mount Glendor, free the beautiful Zelda and, together, we will make a new and better race of men as you have instructed.”

The Devil, Zakron, was disturbed. His spies had informed him that the traitorous Solaris had given full authority to the young Demetrius to find and kill him. As if that wasn’t bad enough, a superior race of humans was to be created by the union

of Demetrius and Zelda, the human whore of Solaris. For the first time in a thousand years, the Devil felt threatened. He knew what steps had to be taken in order to neutralize the threat. First, he must kill Zelda. That would immediately put pay to the plan of creating a human super-race. Zakron had considered this move many times before now, but he'd deemed it unnecessary as long as he had Solaris's tacit support. Now, he would move quickly. Of course it was true that Zelda was his mother, but this was an emergency, and it was difficult to have much filial affection for a woman who'd been stuck inside a block of ice for several millennia. After her death, he would deal with that presumptuous hind, Demetrius. Finally, he would execute a plan that had been fermenting in his mind for at least a thousand years: the destruction of Solaris and his coterie of sycophants. When that was finally achieved, he, Zakron, would take his rightful place as emperor of the universe. 'Emperor' would be a more appropriate title than the mundane 'King.'

"Zakron Clone, come here," commanded the Devil. It was wise that he'd made a clone of himself to do all his dirty work, and thus avoid risking his own life. Certain parts of the brain had been genetically altered of course, creating a lobotomized servant. He nevertheless retained Zakron's power, courage, and intelligence. From out of the shadows, Zakron's clone labored into view.

"Yes, Master? How can I serve you?"

“Oh don’t be so melodramatic, Zakron Clone,” replied the Devil testily. Can’t you at least talk a little like me on occasions?”

“Master, I do not understand you. I am a mere servant. How can I hope to engage the Supreme Being in idle chatter?”

“You’re right, of course,” replied Zakron, placated and pleased in spite of himself. “Anyway, I wish you to depart from my castle and travel to the frozen northern wastes immediately. There, on the peak of Mount Glendor, you will find a woman frozen inside a glacier of blue ice. Use whatever weapons necessary to destroy the glacier, and kill the woman inside.” Zakron Clone looked decidedly dubious.

“But Master...will the mountain or the glacier be protected?” Zakron waved away the protests of his clone.

“No doubt, but it’s your job to deal with any traps that Solaris may have set. Remember, you have all my own wily resources to call upon in any emergency.” Zakron Clone nodded gloomily.

“You fill me with new confidence, Master. I must go now?”

“Didn’t I just say ‘immediately’ you idiotic oaf?” roared Zakron. “Sometimes your stupidity makes me doubt that you’re a true clone at all!”

“Yes, Master,” replied Zakron Clone, with a bow of the head.

“Now, get out of my sight and perform the task I have set you. Be sure that if you botch this mission, we shall have a new Zakron Clone generated.”

“I leave immediately, Master. Be assured that I will succeed.”

Demetrius knew exactly where to find Zakron. The location of his castle in the fire regions was well known. The question, he asked himself, was whether the Devil would stay to fight, or flee into the flaming wastes of his kingdom. Demetrius didn't wait long to receive the answer. As he approached the great, fiery castle of Zakron, he spied the Devil himself waiting outside the keep, cloaked in fiery flames. His great behemoth wings fanned the flames around him to greater wrath and intensity. His red eyes glowed like molten coals and vicious, razor-sharp teeth glistened in the crimson glow. The lethal talons, said to have ended Meteron's life, were naked and unsheathed, and the green oily skin shimmered with martial intent. As Zakron observed the approach of his enemy, he roared out a challenge.

“Son of Meteron, come and receive the same death as your father. These naked talons will rip across your milky white throat, just as they ripped across your father's throat, and he was a far greater warrior than a stripling like you!” Demetrius arrested his flight for a moment to respond to the Devil's taunts.

“Zakron, your time has come. My father was the bravest of men, but alas, he was only a mortal, and unable to deal with an abomination like you in frontal combat. Instead, he used his brain to plant the seed that would eventually defeat you. That seed has ripened to maturity, and now it is coming

to visit the vengeance of Meteron on your bestial head." The Devil laughed heartily at these words.

"Fool. Do you really believe that a stripling like you can defeat one who has been battle-hardened by millennia of conflict? You will die here, long before you can gain the battle experience that would have given you a chance in combat against me."

"Zakron," replied Demetrius soberly, "you forget that I have the gods themselves fighting with me. Solaris and Psyche will observe our battle from on high. They shall help me if my youthful strength fails."

"My congratulations," said Zakron, sneering contemptuously. "You have the support of a liar, and a whore. Let us see what good they may do you!"

"Aleileila," shouted Demetrius, resuming his flight toward the waiting Zakron. He knew that the future of men, and even the gods themselves, hung on the result of the coming conflict. Demetrius was skilled to perfection in the martial arts, but as Zakron had said, he was now fighting above his weight. The Devil was a god-man like himself. He also had eons of experience to call upon that the inexperienced eighteen-year-old could only dream about. The conflict was short and brutal. Demetrius's first frenzied assault lopped off Zakron's left hand, and only the Devil's oily scales frustrated a potentially lethal dagger thrust. He screamed in pain and surprise at his narrow escape. Emboldened, Demetrius drew back his massive sword in order to end the conflict with a sin-

gle blow. At this crucial point, Zakron's experience came to his aid. Using a power undeveloped by Demetrius, he became invisible and rounded on his amazed opponent. With the talons of his remaining hand he ripped through the skin and bone of Demetrius's unprotected back and then sunk his vicious teeth into his opponent's neck. Demetrius sunk into unconsciousness, and it was only a matter of time before the effect of Zakron's attack would kill him. At this critical juncture, Psyche intervened by means of a mind probe.

"Zakron, spare my dear son Demetrius and I will join you as your wife," she said. "Together, we can breed a new race that will be sympathetic to you, and help in controlling the Cosmos. All this I offer you, and in return I ask only one thing: that you spare my son, Demetrius. I even have the power to restore your severed hand." Psyche's unexpected message amused the Devil.

"Why, Psyche, are you telling me that you love me after all? I find your offer pleasing. However, I'm not sure if your poor boy can be saved at this juncture. He is already more dead than alive. Furthermore, what does Solaris think of this brave offer made to save your son, Demetrius? Surely he will not accept the creation of a super-race dedicated to his own downfall, and my coronation as emperor of the universe?" The Devil had to wait for some moments before he received a reply, but it was delivered by Solaris himself.

"Zakron, I am beside Psyche, and I agree to her sacrifice. An Oracle has convinced me of Demetrius's importance and I cannot let him die.

Free the boy. Psyche will join you, but Demetrius must be returned to the Palace of Solaris.” The Devil exulted in his triumph.

“Old man, I have finally defeated you. Universal power shifts to Zakron, and within a few short years you and the other antique gods will be condemned to eternal oblivion. Let it be so. Take the carcass of the boy and send forth the beautiful Psyche to join me at my fiery castle. Zakron’s victory is complete.”

And so Psyche joined the Devil in his fiery castle in order to save her beloved son, Demetrius. Solaris’s Oracle had revealed that only Demetrius could destroy Zakron. His death would result in a loss of all hope for the future: Zakron would surely become emperor of the universe.

As things stood, the future of the Universe still hung in the balance. Demetrius’s wounds healed slowly, but his heart was broken on learning that his mother had taken to the Devil’s bed in order to save his life. He turned to the mysterious Oracle to reanimate his soul, and for the next ten years he devoted himself to martial training under the guidance of Solaris himself. Daily, he meditated for hours on the terrible vengeance he would wreak on Zakron.

And what of the Devil and Psyche during this ten-year period? Strangely, despite lying with Zakron every night, Psyche never again fell pregnant. It is rumored by some that before joining Zakron, Psyche had laid waste to her own womb, leaving it barren. The rumor was greatly strengthened by the fact that since their union, fruit no

longer grew in the gardens of Elysium. Naturally the Devil was angry, and abused Psyche terribly. He was sure that she was playing some trick on him, but all evidence confirmed that Psyche remained fertile. Finally, Zakron began to have doubts about himself. Was it his fault that Psyche had never fallen pregnant? Further examinations proved that he too remained fertile. Baffled, but somehow sure in his heart of Psyche's treachery, the Devil continued to abuse Demetrius's mother in the most obscene ways until she begged him to give her the benefits of Oblivion. Naturally, he would not.

Besides Demetrius's hard-won survival, another scrap of hope for the future remained. Poor Zakron Clone's attempt to destroy the blue glacier, and Zelda within it, had failed miserably. Fierce dragons, walls of fire, and mystic incantations had baffled Zakron's clone, and eventually destroyed him somewhere on the heights of frozen Mount Glendor. So Zelda had survived, and with her, the tenuous hopes of Demetrius and Psyche for the creation of a human super-race. Soon, with his training complete, Demetrius would be prepared to fulfill his destiny. He could free the universe by regaining power, and liberate his beloved mother. Zelda would finally be freed from her beautiful prison, and a superior human race would be theirs for the making.

The World on Fire

It was December 21, 1907, and the haggard young man was trying to place a red candle on the pinnacle of a small Christmas tree. It stood forlornly in the corner of the small downstairs apartment in a cheap suburb of Linz. He was interrupted by his sister's agitated voice.

"Aloysius, come at once. Mother is asking for you, and I fear that she is really about to leave us this time." He turned from his task immediately.

"I am coming, Angela. We will not disturb Dr. Bloch this evening," he said firmly. "He can do nothing, and we should say goodbye and grieve our mother's parting as a family." The young girl appeared not to hear her brother's words.

"Oh, quickly...come quickly, Aloysius," she said distractedly. "She is already teetering on the edge of life: not yet entirely gone, but hardly still with us, either. Delay another moment and I cannot say that you will still find her alive when you enter the kitchen." Aloysius surveyed the mean apartment wretchedly. They'd done everything they could for their dear mother, even installing her bed in the kitchen, the only warm place in the

house. Nothing had seemed to help. On his last visit, Dr. Bloch had made it clear that the end was approaching fast. The young Jewish doctor had done everything within his power to help Klara Hitler in her struggle with breast cancer, but little more could now be expected. A large bill was still to be settled after...after...

Even now, the young Aloysius could not accept that his mother was going to die. He loved her intensely, and together they'd taken delight in their fantasies about his artistic aspirations. She'd even offered money to support him when he'd sought to enter the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. He had never been able to admit to her that he'd failed the entry exam for having 'insufficient talent.' Let her pass away from him with her dreams for her bold, proud, magnificent son still intact. Somehow, he'd make a life of meaning for himself, and for her. His mother would become as sacred as the Madonna. "Hail Klara," mother of...what?

Aloysius passed into the poorly lit kitchen and approached his mother's bed. His sisters, Angela, Pauline, and Klara, were performing various tasks to make her passing easier. The young man knew that she would not die without first blessing him. He moved slowly to the right side of the bed and took his mother's weak and emaciated hand.

"Aloysius.... Is that you, Aloysius?" Klara Hitler asked faintly. "God bless you, my son, and may all your future works prosper. We dreamed together, and I am sure that you will realize all of our heart-felt aspirations."

“Mother...” He tried to speak, but couldn’t. Tears were close and he didn’t want her to pass away with such an image of him in her mind. He braced himself and tried again.

“Mother, I will be the man that you have made. You have been, are, and always will be, the most important woman in my life.” The effort of his words caused Aloysius to break down and weep bitterly into his mother’s bosom. Gently, Klara Hitler took her son’s hand and held it tenderly in her own. Wearily, she kissed his head. She gazed slowly at each one of them.

“Thank you, my children, for caring for me so well during this difficult time. May Jesus, Mary, and all the saints in heaven reward you for your kindness to me.” They watched her fall quietly into a deep sleep. An hour later, her spirit slipped gently from her body, leaving the four children to grieve her passing.

Now that she was gone, Aloysius could contain his wretchedness no longer. He slumped into a nearby chair and closed his eyes, isolated from the others in the intensity of his misery. His sisters busied themselves with the proper procedures for the presentation of their mother’s body. After fifteen minutes had passed, Angela slipped out to summon Dr. Bloch, who would have to sign the death certificate. No one approached Aloysius.

Bloch was in no way surprised to receive the news of Klara Hitler’s death. He’d been amazed that she’d clung so tenaciously to life, when all hope was already long since gone. Taking up his

coat and doctor's bag, he accompanied the pale-faced girl back to the small apartment.

Aloysius was Caesar, crowned with all the blessings of his people. He was the chosen one, the Messiah, the genius artist. He was a modern Napoleon, ruler of all he surveyed. His enemies trembled before him, and even his friends and allies uttered their words in low, hurried syllables. The entire world feared him. He was the chosen one, destined to harness the power of fate itself to the glorious German cause. More than a king, equal or superior to past exemplars, such as Siegfried and Attila, his destiny was to set the world itself on fire; to be purified and worthy of the great German people. Mother, you have not lived in vain. You have sired a Master, a Titan, in me...

A routine check by Dr. Bloch confirmed Klara Hitler to be officially dead. As he signed the death certificate in front of the sisters, he could not help glancing curiously at the wretched figure of Aloysius slumped awkwardly in the armchair with an ashen face and closed eyes.

"Would you like me to take a look at him too?" he asked, motioning toward the inert figure. Angela shook her head decidedly.

"No, don't bother, doctor. He is stunned by our mother's death, but he will recover." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "It is more difficult for him than the rest of us. He was her favorite, and together, they plotted fantastic schemes for how he would become great in the world. In truth,

he is only of moderate ability, and our mother's passing will represent the demarcation point between fantasy and reality for him." Dr. Bloch passed the signed death certificate over to Angela.

"If there is anything else I can do, please don't hesitate to call me. I am always at your disposal."

"You have been so kind to our mother and our family, Doctor. Please take our sincere thanks, and be assured that we will visit you shortly to pay you what we owe." Dr. Bloch made a dismissive sign with his hand.

"There will be time enough for that. I regret very much that I was unable to save your mother."

"We know that you did everything in your power to save her, Doctor," Angela replied kindly.

"I did nothing...nothing," he mumbled, suddenly overwhelmed by the tableaux of intimate grief surrounding him. "Stop by my surgery whenever you have the time... Goodbye...Goodbye."

"Goodbye, doctor. And once again, we thank you."

The Angel of the Bottomless Pit

I'd been in New Haven for a few days now, posing as a Yale postgraduate student looking for temporary accommodation. No one could possibly have guessed that I was really a foreign correspondent for the London *Citizen*, on the trail of a big story: no less than an expose of the Yale secret society, Skull and Bones.

What did I know so far? Well, I was aware that some of the most famous Anglo-Saxon families in America were well represented amongst the arcane members list. I knew that several past Presidents of the U.S.A., as well as the present incumbent, were also members of this secret society. It had been set up more than a hundred years previously as a direct offshoot of the German Order, which had later developed into the infamous Thule Society. The Thule Society had become the means by which the average German was convinced of the German Order's political and philosophical program: it had used violence, racism, and Germanic legend as its propaganda tools, and the Hindu swastika as its emblem. Its most famous member, Adolf Hitler, had gradually metamor-

phosed the elite Thule Society into the mass Nazi (or National) Party. Hitler had been trained in Madam Blavatsky's Secret Doctrine, and in the occult arts, by the Thule Society's founder, Heinrich Eichmann. On his deathbed, Eichmann had said:

"Watch Hitler. It is he who will put my plan into action, but it is I who will be pulling the strings."

Eichmann had been convinced that Hitler was the one for whom he had been waiting; the Promised One; the Anti-Christ; the Angel of the Bottomless Pit prophesied about in Revelation: "And the fifth angel sounded, and I saw a star fall from heaven unto the earth: and to him was given the key of the bottomless pit. And he opened the bottomless pit; and there arose a smoke out of the pit, as the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the earth were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit. And there came out of the pit locusts upon the earth: and unto them was given power, as the scorpions of the earth have power...And they had tails like unto scorpions and there were stings in their tails...And they had a king over them, which is *the angel of the bottomless pit*, whose name in the Hebrew tongue is Abaddon, but in the Greek tongue hath his name Appolyon...And the number of the army...were two hundred thousand thousand: and I heard the number of them."

The German Order's aim had been clear: to unite the world into a single political entity where those with the purest Germanic blood were the rulers and masters. Lesser races were to be exter-

minated like vermin, or used as slaves to give the Master Race more free time and leisure. Skull and Bones presumably shared the same political and philosophical aims. It was said that pictures of the German Order's founding fathers were to be found on the walls of their crypt during initiation ceremonies. The ceremonies themselves recalled Eichmann's methods with Hitler. Eichmann had supposedly initiated Hitler into the super-consciousness by means of various depraved sexual practices. The fifteen new Skull and Bones members chosen each year had to lie in a coffin in the infamous crypt and detail their sexual history. Later, they swore an oath of allegiance to Skull and Bones that superseded all other loyalties—including loyalty to the United States itself. If they ever betrayed the society, the sexual details they had provided during their initiation were made public. There were never more than six hundred members at any one time, and of these, only sixty were said to be active. They held a meeting inside the Empire State Building in New York once a year.

The *Citizen* had set me up in the very comfortable New Haven Hotel on George Street, just a few minutes away from the Yale Campus. I'd also been provided with a contact: Professor Arnold De Vere of the Yale History Department. One of my bosses on the paper was an old friend of his, and over a period of years they'd discussed the nature of Skull and Bones at length. I knew De Vere was vehemently anti-Skull and Bones, and wanted to expose it as a pernicious and cancerous entity

preying on the democratic principles of the U.S. constitution. He had his main offices on the Old Campus in Steinbeck House. A day after my arrival, I presented myself there at nine o'clock in the morning. The secretary had given me rather an odd look when I'd told her that I had an appointment with the Professor. At thirty-six, perhaps I looked a little mature to be a new graduate student. After a brief telephone call, she gave me a disapproving look.

"Professor De Vere says to go right in." I smiled and pushed open the big mahogany door. I found De Vere's big desk over in the far right corner of a spacious and modern office. An owlish man of about sixty-five stood behind it, smiling at me and extending his hand in greeting.

"So you've finally arrived, Alex. Trigger told me you were due to arrive here any day." I was aware that 'Trigger' was my boss's student nickname; apparently a reference to his numerous sexual exploits while at Yale.

"Yes, thank you, Professor De Vere. I've had a chance to settle in at the New Haven Hotel, over on George Street. It's very pleasant, and way above my usual budget, but the *Citizen* is paying for it, of course." The old man gave a good-humored chuckle.

"Perks of the job eh, my boy? Well, well, I'm very glad to see you...very glad indeed. Perhaps together, we can finally begin to expose this pernicious secret society, Skull and Bones." I nodded slowly.

"I hope so Professor, but I don't think it's going to be easy. What strategy do you think we should adopt initially?"

"Well, I've appointed a graduate student as your mentor, who I know to be a prominent member of Skull and Bones. I think that for the first week or so you should settle in, and take as much time as you can to talk with this fellow. His name is Orlando Green. Try to find out as much as you can about his activities, beliefs, ambitions, etc. After that—and depending on what useful information you can garner—we will plan the next stage of our strategy. Of course, we'll have to meet up here a few times a week in order to keep the pretence of your post-graduate program going. Trigger told me that you are in fact a history graduate, and did some research at one of the big universities over in England." I smiled in a self-deprecating way.

"That's right. I wrote a thesis that was accepted for the degree of Ph.D. by London University."

"And what was the area of research?" enquired the Professor curiously.

"Hitler. Hitler and the Occult." He gave a short, high-pitched laugh.

"How very appropriate, Alex. I think that you'll find your present assignment fascinating. However, do not underestimate the danger. We are attempting to reveal the secrets of a society that has existed for more than a hundred years, and has as its members some of the most important men in America." I gave the Professor a wry smile.

"I'm aware of the danger, Professor, but can't allow it to deter me. I've been interested in doing work in this area ever since I researched the German Thule Society for my Ph.D."

"Ah...the descendant of the German Order. Affiliate society to Skull and Bones." He looked pensive. "I hope to God that Skull and Bones is not as depraved as the German Thule Society, and doesn't share its political program of supranationalism." I shrugged.

"That's yet to be discovered, Professor. We are aware that the Thule Society and Skull and Bones were sister organizations." The Professor nodded his head two or three times in a worried manner.

"Yes...yes indeed, Alex. These questions still remain to be clarified." After a moment of deliberation, the Professor's countenance brightened a little. "But let us forget these matters, for the moment at least. Meet me in Templeton's Restaurant at one-thirty this afternoon and I'll introduce you to your mentor, Orlando Green." Templeton's was the restaurant at the New Haven Hotel.

"That's very convenient Professor, thank you. Perhaps we can convince our patrician prince that the Kessler family is rich and influential enough to support the ideas and principles of Skull and Bones." Professor De Vere gave his deep-throated chuckle.

"My thoughts exactly, Alex."

At one-thirty that afternoon I waited patiently for the Professor and Orlando Green in the luxuriously appointed Templeton's restaurant. I'd been

refreshing my knowledge of the known members of Skull and Bones for the last hour. The list made interesting reading. Of the fifty names I had, at least forty held elite positions in the American government or civil service. I was reminded again of the startling, and disquieting, fact that Skull and Bones virtually ran America.

"Hope we're not late, my boy." Professor De Vere's high-pitched voice interrupted my deliberations and I sprang to my feet to greet him. A dandified blonde youth accompanied him—Orlando Green I assumed.

"Hello, Professor. Glad you were able to make our appointment. I guess this gentleman with you must be Orlando Green, the fellow who's kindly consented to show me the ropes around here?" We all shook hands before the Professor replied.

"Yes, Alex. Orlando is one of our finest minds at Yale. He took the highest marks of his year at graduation. He is currently researching certain aspects of the American constitution," the Professor concluded vaguely.

"Really?" I asked, attempting to feign an expression of frankness and interest. "That's quite an honor, Orlando. I'm afraid you're going to leave me far behind." Green, who was dressed in a perfectly cut dark blue suit, red tie, and white shirt, flashed me a brilliant smile.

"That's enough of that, Alex. We don't stand on ceremony here. Professor De Vere has told me all about you—and I must say that your area of

study fascinates me.” I almost flashed the Professor an enquiring look, but thought better of it.

“Oh?” I replied as we took our places at the table. “How much has he told you?”

“Well, only the general outlines of your research parameters, and the provisional title: ‘Adolf Hitler and the Thule Society.’”

“Ah, yes,” I replied, guessing that the Professor had wanted to pique Green’s interest and get him talking. “It is fascinating indeed...” After we’d ordered our meal, Green resumed the conversation.

“Professor De Vere informs me that your family is German in origin, and that your grandfather was an early member of the Thule Society, and a friend of Rudolf Hess’s.” The Professor came to my assistance at this point.

“Yes, Alex. I am sorry for being so garrulous about your background with Orlando...but the fact is that around here, and within the circles of the Historical Society, any connection with the Thule Society is considered almost as a badge of honor. Orlando’s great-grandfather also came from Germany.” The young man nodded.

“Quite true, Alex. On my mother’s side. Most of us here are of the Lindbergh persuasion. Hitler made some mistakes, but his basic ideas were sound enough. As you know, he turned the philosophical and political aims of the Thule Society into a number of easily acceptable tenets which ordinary people could grasp in the mass appeal of his Nazi party.”

“Like the inferiority of the Jews?” I asked involuntarily, and with a heavy irony that Orlando Green, thankfully, appeared to miss entirely.

“Exactly, Alex. Everyone knows that the Jews have preyed on the citizens of Europe and America for centuries. Liquidation was perhaps a step too far. I tend to agree with David Irving that Hitler knew little about what was happening to the Jews, and cared even less. ‘The Final Solution’ was entirely Himmler’s handiwork.” The conversation had taken a particularly distasteful turn as far as I was concerned. I was Jewish myself, and had lost both my grandparents in the Auschwitz gas chambers. However, I had to convince Green, and the others like him, of my radical right-wing credentials.

“Interesting point, Orlando. I agree that the concentration camps were counter-productive. Himmler was a traitorous fool—and Hitler realized that before the end. It was only Goebbels that really stood firm with him until the last moments.” The young dandified patrician nodded his head in agreement, while Professor De Vere, who had been silent for some time, gave me a worried look. I think he guessed that it was time to change the subject.

“Alex, Orlando has offered to show you around New Haven tonight,” he began brightly. “I think you will find the experience both interesting and enlightening. Orlando takes a particular interest in the local history of New Haven...and New England in general. His family is one of the most respected in Connecticut.” He added one of his

sharp and high-pitched little laughs. "And no doubt he will also introduce you to a student bar or two." We all laughed heartily—and I sensed that each of us was acting a part for our own arcane reasons.

"What time would you like me to come around, Alex?" asked Green politely.

"Well, now I've seen the Professor, I'm free for the rest of the day. I'm really at your convenience, Orlando."

"Okay," replied Green in his measured and pleasant voice. "I'll pick you up at seven."

"I'm looking forward to it," I answered, giving the young man a brilliant and utterly false smile.

Orlando Green called at the New Haven Hotel at precisely seven that evening. I was waiting in the lounge and we immediately set out on our tour. The young man had a brand-new red Ferrari, which seemed a little incongruous in the august surroundings of Yale and New Haven. I remarked on his choice.

"Nice car, Orlando, but I would have thought that you'd go for an American model." Green shrugged his shoulders dismissively.

"I like to support the world economy when I can, Alex. There is a world outside the U.S., and sometimes other countries do things better than we do. Europeans are particularly adept at producing luxury goods, via a complex system of family artisans."

"Well, labor costs are certainly very high in America—and in Europe too. Maybe in the future,

most of our big companies are going to transfer their main operations to places like India and China where wages and production costs are far less." I was fishing for a response and the young Yale patrician didn't disappoint me.

"Exactly, Alex. Surely there is a need for a world economy united under a single political power, utilizing the brightest minds from the developed world as its leaders? The necessary apparatus for such a change is already in place. It is only the political will that is lacking...but some of us are doing our best to change that," he concluded obliquely. I nodded my head deliberately.

"I can see the logic in what you say. But how can the system be changed? Particularly given the West's obsession with democracy." Green flashed me one of his dazzling smiles.

"It is already changing, Alex. The U.S.—and to a lesser degree, the Europeans—are so far ahead of the rest of the world that a single economic system is already in place. Unworkable democratic principles are undoubtedly an obstacle, but that situation is changing as more and more influential men come over to the Lindbergh persuasion. Now, it is only the political will that is needed to consolidate these economic gains into political gains as well." I gave Green a look that I hoped he would interpret as admiring.

"I think I see what you're driving at, Orlando. A single world political system, headed by the U.S., and the best of the Europeans. It's what the visionaries like Napoleon, Eichmann, and Hitler

have always wanted.” Orlando Green smiled again.

“I’m glad to find we’re on the same wavelength, Alex. By the way, Professor De Vere told me a little about your background. Your father has considerable armament concessions from the British government?” The Professor and I had worked out this little deceit together.

“That’s right. He’s pretty closely involved in foreign policy decisions too. I guess that I’ll be taking over from him one day soon. Of course, we have a continuous battle against the do-gooders—as I suppose you do, too.” Green nodded his head in agreement.

“That”’s very true, Alex. Not everyone is able to see that it is the destiny of the West to unite the planet into a single political and economic entity. Great opportunities lie before us in the near future, and it is for people like you and I to initiate the necessary changes.” We were now driving down College Street, between the old campus on the one side, and the famous Center Church and Crypt on the other. So far, Green had told me little about the campus and the town of New Haven. He appeared to have other matters on his mind.

“Look here, Alex. What about having a drink and something to eat in a little Irish bar near here? I’m sure you need to unwind a little after a tiring day.” Green’s idea seemed well adapted to my own concerns and I was happy to concur.

“I was hoping that you’d suggest something similar, Orlando. I’m ready for a drink. The historic sites of New Haven, though I’m sure they are

very interesting, can wait until a more propitious moment.”

“I see more and more clearly that you’re a man after my own heart, Alex,” he replied. We stopped in front of an olde worlde-type establishment. A wooden sign with the name ‘Grogans’ on it hung outside.

“This is it, Alex. Let’s go inside and meet a few people.” The interior of Grogans was luxuriously appointed in a nineteenth century European style. Most of the numerous tables were already occupied. Orlando Green seemed to be looking for a particular group, and after a few moments of searching, he waved his hand at a group of young people occupying a table in one of the far corners of the room.

They seemed pleased to see him, and there was hand shaking all around. The group comprised of three young men and a woman. The men were dressed conventionally in suits and ties. The woman had long red hair and green eyes, and seemed to be a genuine Irish manifestation. She was very beautiful, and for the first time that day thoughts other than those connected with Skull and Bones entered my mind.

“Alex, let me introduce you to my friends,” began Green in an apparently open and candid way. “The tall, dark fellow is Hector Purveyance, the prematurely balding type is Amos Hunzekker (studies too much!), and the red man with the twinkle in his eye is Phelim Harrison, who has genuine Irish ancestry. The beautiful lady by his side is his sister, Anna, visiting us from New York

for a few days.” There was a general shaking of hands and I noticed that Harrison’s sister, Anna, seemed to feel a little out of place and uncomfortable. We settled down and ordered food and beer. Green’s friends were already well on their way to getting drunk.

“Alex here, is British,” began Green, “and his grandfather was a member of the German Thule Society: a friend of Eichmann himself.” There was a sudden silence, and the young men appeared to sober up rapidly. I sensed an air of disbelief, even antagonism, and shifted uncomfortably in my seat.

“Yes, that’s right,” I began. “I believe he even had some dealings with Hitler himself in the early days. He was particularly close to Rudolf Hess, and was an acknowledged expert on Nordic anthropology.” Green conferred his beaming smile on me, before turning to his friends.

“Would you believe it, guys? Alex is a real throwback to the Thule Society. If you boys are agreeable, I was thinking of asking him to become an honorary member of our own little society. He’s obviously one of us, and we’re honored to have the grandson of a man who knew Eichmann amongst us. What do you say?” Green’s proposal was met with an uneasy silence. At last, the young man who’d been introduced as Amos Hunzekker spoke.

“Why, I’ll second him, Orlando, if you propose him,” he said, trying to sound hail and hearty. Phelim Harrison also nodded his head, though his sister remained tight-lipped.

“That’s settled then,” declared Green, slapping me on the back. “Let’s finish up here and then take Alex off to the crypt.”

“You mean that you want me to become an honorary member of your political society tonight?” I asked uneasily. “Doesn’t it take longer than that?” Green laughed heartily.

“Usually, yes. But I think that we can make an exception in your case. After all, Professor De Vere has already acted as your character reference. No point in wasting time. We should get you straight into the swing of things here. We call our little club Skull and Bones—rather melodramatic, I know, but it’s a matter of tradition. We’re always looking for good new men. Of course you won’t be a voting member, as that honor is granted only to those who are chosen as S and B’s in their senior year. However, you can be sure that any advice you give will be taken seriously. After all, your credentials go right back to Eichmann.” It was the first time that the secret society’s name had been mentioned, and it caused another awkward silence to fall over the others in the group. Green didn’t seem to notice. “Of course there are a few formalities, but we can get them over with quickly enough. In less than two hours from now, you’ll be one of us, Alex.”

We finished our meal, and left. I noticed that everyone except Green seemed to be feeling ill at ease. I certainly shared their state of mind. We poured into a couple of cars (but not Green’s Ferrari, which remained where he’d left it) and set off—to where?

“Where are we heading, Orlando?” I asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

“I’m sorry, Alex, but some things we can’t tell you. I’m afraid that you’re going to have to submit to having your eyes blindfolded. Is that okay with you?” There was little I could do except nod my head. One of Green’s friends pulled a scarf roughly over my eyes and tied it tightly behind the back of my head. The rest of the journey was completed in almost complete silence. After about fifteen minutes, the car slowed down and stopped.

“Here we are, Alex,” came Green’s smooth tone. “Just relax and allow yourself to be led.” Someone grabbed my arm roughly and pulled me out of the car. I could feel the chill fall wind blowing against me as I walked unsteadily along. Eventually, we reached what seemed to be a set of descending steps. I’d counted twenty of them by the time we reached the bottom. I was pulled forward, and after a moment or two, several strong pairs of hands lifted me up bodily. I was placed in what seemed to be a comfortable bed with sides before the blindfold was ripped from my eyes.

I lay in a richly padded box, a coffin, I realized with disgust. Around me stood four figures dressed in black robes and white, expressionless masks. Each of them held a dagger in his hand. The chamber was only dimly lit, but I was able to make out some old photographs on the walls. After a moment, a peremptory and expressionless voice that I did not recognize spoke.

“Alex Kessler, do you wish to become a member of Skull and Bones?” Although by this time I was feeling real fear, I knew that it was of paramount importance to keep my nerve and go through with the initiation ceremony, whatever the horrors involved might be.

“Yes, I do,” I heard myself say like some psychotic groom of the night.

“Do you swear on your mother’s life to work for the realization of our aims, and to hold your present vow more sacred than any other you have given in the past, or might give in the future?”

“I do.” I again intoned the affirmation like some enamored acolyte.

“Do you vow to hold your friends of our lodge dearer to you than family or country?”

“Yes,” I hissed. I was sweating profusely, and only the exercise of great discipline prevented me from scrambling out of my premature coffin and fleeing for safety.

“Alex Kessler, do you accept the premise on which our society is built: that democracy has failed, and that the world must be united into a single political unity, with the brightest and the best of the white race to rule?” This was almost more than I could bear, but again I nodded my head and hissed out the single, necessary word.

“Yes.” The four masked men approached my coffin and the nearest caught up my right wrist. Without a word, he slashed his knife across my palm. The blood flowed profusely over my body and the coffin. I had managed to refrain from screaming. The second masked man repeated the

procedure on my left palm, and I began to fear that I might bleed to death before the grisly ceremony could even be completed. However, the worst had been left for last. One of the remaining figures bent down at the head of my coffin, grasped my hair with his left hand, and placed his knife against my throat.

“Now, tell us about your sex life,” he rapped out authoritatively. I was thirty-six, and happily married in Britain. I hadn’t frequented prostitutes for a long time. In truth, there wasn’t much to tell.

“I am married, but as a young student I used to frequent a Soho brothel in London.”

“Names and addresses,” rapped my interlocutor, jerking my head back roughly. I hardly remembered, but I made up some bogus street names and prostitutes. There was a brief silence before the man spoke again.

“That is not enough, Alex Kessler. We need something that will assure us of your loyalty.” He turned to his side. “Get Anna in here.” One of the men glided away into the surrounding blackness. Minutes later, he reappeared with the red haired girl I’d met earlier in the evening. Her face was streaked and it looked as if she’d been crying profusely. The man with his knife at my throat spoke again.

“Get undressed, Anna. Our friend, Alex, has a special treat in store for him tonight. Stand up against that wall. If he has blood in his veins he won’t need much room. I saw the way he was looking at you tonight.” Sullenly, the girl peeled off her clothes and stood obediently against the

wall nearest to me. I was roughly pulled out of the coffin and my trousers stripped off. The three masked men pushed me across to the wall where Anna stood waiting. A human barrier formed around us, and a jolting elbow sent me staggering against the woman's warm body.

"Now don't keep us waiting longer than necessary, Alex," came an insistent voice. "We know that you're a normal, heterosexual man. Take your pleasure, and as soon as you're finished, we can all get out of here." It was over in a moment, and I fell back utterly drained and full of shame.

"That's a good boy, Alex," came the mocking voice. "I think that now it's time for you to graduate." I felt a hard object crash venomously into my skull. Complete darkness descended and I knew no more.

I awoke in my bed at the New Haven Hotel the next morning. I was inclined to believe that the happenings of the previous night were no more than a terrible nightmare, but my bloodied hands and a large lump on the side of my head were enough to dissuade me from this point of view. I looked at my watch: it was seven a.m. I decided that I had to see Professor De Vere immediately to inform him of the previous evening's events. I had been fundamentally compromised, and there was nothing more I could do here. My assignment was a failure, and I never wanted to hear about Skull and Bones again.

It was eight a.m. when I arrived at the Professor's office. Only the porter and a few cleaners were around, and I expected half an hour's wait

before the Professor arrived. I knocked at his office door anyway. As I'd expected, there was complete silence within. I leaned against the heavy wooden door wearily. To my surprise, it flew open under the pressure I exerted. Taken off balance, I stumbled into the room, falling onto my hands and knees. Looking up, I saw a grey haired figure lying spread-eagled, face downwards, in the middle of the room. I didn't have to get any closer to know that it was Professor De Vere, and that he was dead. Suddenly I heard a scream behind me, and turned to see the Professor's unpleasant secretary standing in the doorway. Orlando Green stood behind her.

"What's happened to Professor De Vere?" shouted the woman hysterically. "Is he...dead?" Green pushed roughly by.

"Leave this to me, Mrs. Stott. It looks like this fellow here has murdered the Professor during some heated argument." Like a man in a dream, I watched Green bend over the Professor's inert body and take his wrist. After a moment, he spoke once again. "Yes, I'm afraid he's dead all right. Strangled or suffocated, I'd say. There are traces of blood around his neck and on his shirt—could be from this fellow's hands. Looks like the maniac tried to kill himself as well. Better call the police. Lock the door until they arrive. I'll keep an eye on this sorry specimen until then." The secretary left the room obediently, closing and locking the door behind her. Orlando Green crossed over to the Professor's desk and slumped lazily into a chair.

From there, he flashed me one of his dazzling smiles.

“Looks like your stay here is going to be rather brief, Kessler. Harrison’s sister, Anna, has already been to the police and reported you for raping her last night. Now it seems that you’ve murdered Professor De Vere as well. I rather think we’re going to have to cancel your honorary membership of Skull and Bones. Wouldn’t do to have rapists and murderers amongst us.”

I was almost incapable of giving a coherent reply to the mocking face regarding me with a self-satisfied languor from the Professor’s chair.

“Green...you know I didn’t do anything.”

“Do I, Alex? You must have done something to Anna, as she is most upset this morning, and all the evidence in this room certainly points to you as the culprit.”

“What evidence?” I shouted.

“Do calm down, old fellow. There’s no need to shout, you know. I mean, well, here you are, discovered with the Professor’s body in his office...an unknown outsider. An outsider who, it will quickly be discovered, has been lying about his purposes here. Oh yes, don’t be surprised, Alex. We know very well who you are, and why you came here: a tabloid journalist on the hunt for a sensational story. It doesn’t look good, Alex. It doesn’t look good at all.”

As I gazed at the mocking, sardonic face before me I realized, hopelessly, that I had been completely out of my depth in attempting to take on Skull and Bones. The Professor had made me

believe that together we could make a difference, but he too had pitted himself against forces that were too strong to be controlled or resisted. Wretchedly, I dwelt upon my probable fate as a rapist and murderer.

“Green, for God’s sake, have some pity. You know that I’m innocent. I have a wife and young family over in England. What will become of them without me?” The young patrician laughed, showing rows of perfect white teeth.

“Oh don’t worry about that, Alex. I’m sure your wife will find another suitable mate. This kind of thing happens all the time, you know. Women and children are often far more resilient than we think.”

“But why are you doing this terrible thing? Tell me why!” Green regarded me coolly and thoughtfully for a moment before replying.

“You’re going to have plenty of time to ask yourself that question, Alex. Who knows? Maybe some day, you’ll even come up with the right answer.” At that moment a key turned in the lock behind me and the door was flung open. Three or four burly policemen stood in the entrance with automatic guns trained on my body. Behind them, I could see the Professor’s secretary.

“That’s him,” she shouted triumphantly. “That’s the man who killed Professor De Vere.” I was quickly grasped and manacled, before being roughly led away under the mocking eyes of Mrs. Stott and Orlando Green. One last comment of Green’s reached me as I left:

“Seemed such a nice fellow, too...”

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About the Author

Jon Aristides is the pseudonym of an academic and writer. He travels extensively and has a profound interest in the paranormal and systems of belief. This is his second collection of stories.